

Ep #230: What to Do if You're Not Making Progress



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With Your Host

Jill Angie

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Welcome to *The Not Your Average Runner Podcast*. If you're a woman who has never felt athletic but you still dream about becoming a runner, you are in the right place. I'm Jill Angie, a certified running and life coach, and I teach women how to start running, feel confident, and change their lives. And now I want to help you.

Hey, hey my Rebels. Real quick, before we dive in today, the January class of the Rebel Runner Roadmap is open right now for registration. You have until January 17th to sign up.

Now, the Roadmap is an online class, it's 30 days long and it's going to help you get up and running and feeling super proud. You will build confidence in yourself as a runner. And I promise, you are not too fat, you are not too old, you are not too out of shape. You can be a runner in the body you have right now, and the Rebel Runner Roadmap is the path to get there.

So if you want to join just head over to rebelrunnerroadmap.com. If you have any questions about it all of the information is there. It's rebelrunnerroadmap.com, we'll also have a link the show notes. And registration closes on January 17th. I hope I see you there.

Okay my friend, so today's episode is for you if you have ever felt frustrated because you're not making progress. Because that's what we're all supposed to be thinking about, right? When we start running or we start anything new, we want to see evidence that it's working, that we're getting better, that we're making progress.

And guess what? If you're not making progress you feel frustrated, annoyed, defeated. Like why even bother? If I'm not making progress I should just quit. How many times have you said that? Maybe it's about running, maybe it's about something else. You're like, "Uh, I'm not getting anywhere with this. I'm not making any progress or I'm going backwards.

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I'm getting worse." Right? That feels so awful. And it really does lead to quitting.

So, I was thinking about this the other day and I was like what in the actual fuck does it even mean to, and I'm using air quotes here, make progress? And why are we so convinced that we should always be getting better?

I mean seriously, think about it this way, if you're running you're taking one step after another. You're literally making progress. You're moving forward. But that's not really what we mean. We mean oh I should be getting better at running. I should either go faster, or farther, or it should feel easier, or I should be doing longer run intervals, or shorter walk ones. I need to see evidence that it is working.

So, personally I think that this attachment to making progress is not super helpful. I mean, yes, it's totally fun to have all of those things happen, totally fun. But when we attach our enjoyment of running, our fulfillment of it, our fulfillment within ourselves to certain outcomes we miss all the best parts.

Like how good it feels after you've had a solid run. Or how much better your body feels when you're running regularly, or how a run can take your mood from stressed to relaxed in just minutes. I always say for me running is like pressing control, alt, delete on my brain.

And none of those things have anything to do with making progress. They have everything to do with being in the moment and enjoying the run without expectations. But that is easier said than done when progress is super important to you.

So when you have a defined endpoint in mind, like you want to train for a 5K, for example. Now, it does make sense to be looking for evidence that you're moving towards your goal. And every time you do a longer run or

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maybe you do the same run and it feels a little easier or you go a little faster, you're like, "Yes, I'm closer to my goal." And then you get to feel like you're doing the appropriate things to make your goal a reality. Like you're saying, "Okay, I see evidence. I must be on the right path. I'm doing the right things."

But that's actually kind of misleading because guess what, you are always making progress, even when you can't see it. So I just sent an email about this to my list and this happened to me a few weeks ago and it kind of blew my mind.

So I got real serious about my pull up goal earlier this year. So I have this goal to do an unassisted pull up. And I'm not saying I need to get there within a year, but I've been kind of saying it for years and this year I was like, "All right, I'm actually going to get serious and make it happen."

And so one of the things that my trainer has me doing, she has me doing a lot of things. A lot of different types of movements to build up my back strength, my arm strength, my core strength. But one of the very specific pull up related things that she has me doing is just hanging from the bar.

And the purpose of that is to work on my grip strength so that my hands, the muscles in my hands, are also coming to the party, right? Because you could have the strongest back in the world, but if your fingers are literally too weak to hold on, it doesn't really matter.

So we've been doing this hanging. And she started over the summer, and I shit you not, for the first several weeks, probably two months, I'd hang for like two to three seconds and my hands would just literally slip off the bar. It wasn't like, "Oh, this is hard. I can't do this anymore." They just wouldn't hold on. They would just slip off after like three seconds and I didn't have control over it. And I'll tell you, I was feeling very frustrated with that.

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I'm like, okay, I'm doing all this stuff. And I don't see any evidence that it's working. Why am I even doing this? And I had all the thoughts like well, obviously, I'm too fat to do an unassisted pull up. It's going to take me 10 years to do one at this rate. I'm going to have to lose 50 pounds if I ever want to do it. I'm weak. I'm not trying hard enough. And my favorite, which I've repeated to my trainer multiple times, I'm like, well, if I ever have to hang from a cliff, I'm clearly going to die.

So I made that circumstance of me hanging for a few seconds at a time without any increase in that amount for several weeks mean, well, clearly, I'm a total failure, right? I missed all the other stuff that I was doing. And I put all of my belief in my results on hanging from the bar. But guess what, I mean, I kept doing it because I was like, well, maybe I'll get better, I don't know.

So I kept doing it. And then one day I hung for five seconds instead of three. And I mean, that's almost 100% increase in time, right? Three seconds to five seconds. And then the next week I hung for seven. And then I made it for 10 seconds. Because all of the stuff that I was doing in my training sessions was finally coming together.

And then two weeks ago, I hung for 30 seconds at a time, four different times. A total of two minutes of hanging at the end of my training session. And it happened really fast, right? For the first few months, I couldn't do more than three seconds. And then it took maybe six weeks to go from three seconds to 30 seconds. It was not linear at all. It was flat, flat, flat, flat, and then boom, this huge jump in my ability because I was making progress the whole time, even though I couldn't see it.

And that that really blew my mind. So the first thing I want you to absorb from this podcast is that even when you can't see it, you are making progress. Maybe you're not getting visibly faster, but you're becoming a

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super consistent runner. And that is progress because that's something that's going to serve you way down the line.

Or maybe you aren't going any farther during your regular 30 minute run, but you're building up muscle and bone strength that's maybe invisible to you. But hey, you fall down the stairs one day and don't break an ankle, you'll be like, "Oh, all right, I get it. I see why I was doing all that consistently. Because there are other byproducts of that work that really serve me."

So I want you to think about driving from New York to Los Angeles. Okay, so there you are in New York state, New York City, maybe it takes you a few hours to get across the bridge. But you're in New York City, you put the destination in your GPS, and then you just start following the prompts. So turn left here, turn right here, merge, blah, blah, blah.

And at some point during the journey maybe it says it's going to take you five days to get from New York to LA or however long it's supposed to take. And at some points during that journey, you're going to be pointed south instead of east or west, you're going to be pointed north, instead of west. You might even be pointing back east at some point if you look at the direction your car is driving relative to your destination.

But at no point do you say, "Oh my god, I must be lost because I'm driving south right now instead of west." You're like, no, that's part of the plan. That's the way the roads are and if I stick with it, I'll get there.

And yeah, there might be some traffic jams or construction delays along the way. Or you might decide to spend a few extra days in Kansas checking out the big ball of twine. Or you might even decide to take a giant detour down to Houston to check out this space center because that's what I would totally do.

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But you never say like, “Fuck, here I am in Houston. I guess I'm not making any progress.” Right? No, you trust that the GPS is going to get you there eventually. And maybe it takes longer than expected, or maybe Waze finds a super-fast route that takes three hours off your drive time. But as long as you're on the road, you know you're always making progress towards your goal.

So I want you to look at your life goals the same way. Okay, progress often shows up differently than you think it should. Success is never, ever a straight line. Oh, and comparing your success and your progress to someone else's, please don't ever do that. Because you're not the same person. And even if you're putting in exactly the same amount of effort, it's never going to manifest in exactly the same way.

Now, that's not to say that you don't check in every so often and see how far along you are. So to use our road trip analogy, if your GPS said it was going to take five days to drive across the country. And you've been following the instructions doing everything that it says and it's three weeks later and you're still on I80 in Pennsylvania, trying to get through all the construction.

Well, yes, it might be time to evaluate whether the route you've chosen is a good one given the current conditions, or if it's time to make a tactical detour to a less congested road. Or maybe you decide I'm just going to stay the course, it's going to take longer. I know I'm going to get there eventually.

But what you're not going to be doing on that road trip is checking your GPS every 10 minutes to see how much longer it's going to be to get to LA. You've all been in the car with that person who's like, “Are we there yet? Are we there yet?” You want to smack them. So there's a balance.

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If it says it's going to take you five days, you might check the time, I don't know, every four hours. Am I still on track? Am I still where I thought I should be? Is this an expected detour? You'd evaluate, but you wouldn't be evaluating every 10 minutes. Maybe you'd even do it once a day. And then the rest of the time in the car, you would just enjoy the journey.

Okay, so here's the thing, this is what you should be asking right now, how do I enjoy the journey of running if I'm not making obvious progress? And for those of you who are like, "Fuck progress, I don't care." You might be confused. But for those of you that consider yourself goal oriented and say, "I always have to be moving forward," you're like, "I don't know what you mean, how do I enjoy the journey if I'm not making progress?"

Here's the thing, you guys, when you believe that making progress in running, however you define progress, is the thing that makes you feel proud or happy or fulfilled or motivated. If you believe that progress is the reason you feel those things, well then you are screwed, frankly.

Because if the progress, I'm using air quotes again, doesn't happen the way you think it should, you don't get to feel those emotions, right? You're like, "Well, I have to be making progress." Maybe it's getting faster, "I have to get faster as a runner so that I can feel proud." If you don't get faster you're like, "Well, I guess I can't feel proud."

And that's bullshit, right? But it does, it leads to quitting. Or here's one of the worst things it leads to, over training because you're thinking, "Oh, I'm not doing enough, I got to do more." And then you get injured, which of course means taking a break, right? And then your brain is like, "Oh, look, I had to quit."

So believing that progress is the thing that makes you feel proud or happy or fulfilled or motivated, that's not super helpful for you. But what I've noticed about humans is that most of us have this weird belief. We think I

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have to be moving forward all the time. I have to be getting better, stronger, faster, have more money, get promoted, move forward in my relationship, all the things. I have to follow the path.

Not all of us, but many of us. We need to be going somewhere. And why? This is a serious question. Why do you think you need to be making progress, going forward, getting somewhere? Really think about it. Because I bet you're scratching your head right now going, "I don't know why I just need to."

And you might say, "Well, it's just I'm a goal oriented person." Okay, no, no, when you say I'm a goal oriented person, what you mean is you have the belief that achieving goals is what makes you happy or gives you a purpose. All right, so you have a thought error believing that the goal, the circumstance, or the result in your model, is what gives you the feeling.

So it's just a thought error. But it's not your fault that you have that belief. Because we are socialized to think about achieving milestones in our lives. We graduate from school, we get a job, we find a partner, we get married, we buy a house, we have kids, we move up the ladder at work. Then there's grandkids, right? Like all the things. And it's all like, Okay, what's the next step I've done this, what's next? What's next.

And I'm not here to say that it's either good or bad to want to move through your life in this way, I for sure have had elements of that in my life. But I do think the problem with that belief system is that it can spill over into activities where it doesn't necessarily belong.

We start thinking that everything that we undertake should be a progression. But actually, I think it's really powerful to engage in an activity without ever expecting to make progress. Especially if it's an activity you're getting something out of, right, that you can just practice.

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Think about a yoga practice, right? When I used to do yoga, I don't do it as much anymore. But when I used to do yoga frequently, one of the things that I learned from yoga was the concept of a practice and the concept of non-competition with myself. That I would just show up to the mat and have no expectations and just do my practice.

And yes, some days, I could get deeper into a bend and other days not so much. And then maybe there were some poses that I was like, "Okay, I'm going to deliberately go out of my comfort zone on this pose a little bit." But it was never with the judgment of I've got to be moving forward in my yoga, ever. It was just like the yoga, the act of doing the yoga was the reward.

So being able to engage in an activity without expecting progress, just practicing it without the intention of improving, but with the intention of enjoying it and getting other benefits is so powerful. And I mean, yeah, when you practice something over and over, you will usually find yourself improving because you're being consistent. But instead of making improvement the end goal, the practice, the activity is the reward.

And I think, especially as runners, I think it's hard for us to kind of wrap our heads around that, because there is a competitive side to running in racing. Even if you are not necessarily somebody who says, oh, I'm super competitive. Maybe you don't consider yourself a competitive person, the way the sport of running is structured, there's a winner, there's a last place.

And so I think it is a little bit of an effort for runners to dissociate themselves from that belief that running is about making progress, you know, going from a 5K to a 10k to a half marathon to a marathon or getting faster or setting a PR once a month. It's sort of baked into the sport.

And I think one of the most common questions I get asked as a running coach is, "Okay, I've done a 5K. What should I do next?" And I'm always like, I don't know, what should you do next, right? There's no rule book that

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says you have to do it a certain way. But we have this belief system, and then I think the sport of running kind of triggers that a little bit more because there are milestones. We have this belief system that there's a path that we should be moving along, and that if we're not moving along that path we're somehow doing it wrong.

But if you can release all of those expectations, and beliefs it can be a very, very powerful thing. So let's dig in a little bit to why making progress might matter to you, especially if you don't have a specific goal attached to it, like a 5k or a half marathon. If you're like, "I just want to be a runner. But I got to make progress." If that's you, let's dig in.

And obviously, this is a question that only you can answer. But I want you to really kind of noodle on it really dig in, because I'm going to give you a few things that I think may be going on. And if you resonate with them, great. If not, keep asking yourself the question.

So the first is, it might be because you think that achieving goals is the key to happiness, and that without achievement, without constant achievement, you can't feel proud. And that's actually inaccurate. Right? Because the goal doesn't make you feel anything. It is your thoughts about the goal.

So notice that goal happens, you achieve a goal, that's your circumstance. And then your thought is, "I did a great job on that." Or, "Look at me, I'm a real runner." Whatever the thought is, and then you feel proud. So those thoughts are actually available to you with or without the goal.

It might be because you are seeking approval from other people. Right? And we do this, I've done this in my life. You want other people to know you're good at something, or that you're working hard, or that you're making progress.

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And I know lots of you have friends and family that are like, "Oh, okay, so you're a runner. So how fast can you go? How fast is your 5K time? Can you do a half marathon yet? Did you win your marathon?" You do a 5K and they're like, "Did you win your marathon? How's that little running thing going?" We've all been there.

So you might think that you need to make progress in your running practice so that you have legitimacy in other people's eyes. And of course, people are always going to have their shitty opinions about you whether you win the marathon, or whether you come in at last place. Getting other people to think you're a legitimate runner, that is not your job. Their opinion is none of your business. Okay?

Now, you may have this belief that a lot of us have that the point of doing anything is to get better at it. Why would I bother doing anything if I can't be good at it, if I can't make progress? And again, spoiler alert, this is not a universal truth, it's just a thought you have. You share that belief with a lot of other people. You've been socialized to think that but it's not true. It's just a belief.

And just to break your brain a little bit, there's a lot of things in life that you actually don't worry about getting better at, you just do them. And you don't really care about getting super proficient, right? Do you ever think, "Oh, I really wish I could get better at making the bed? I'm going to work on making my bed so that it's absolutely perfect every day." No, I mean, maybe some of you do. But most people are just like, "All right, beds made, moving on."

Or do you ever think I really wish I could get better at brushing my teeth? Or chewing my food? Or pouring a glass of water? No, you do those things every day. You don't give a shit if you're really good at them or really bad or making progress. You're like, I've achieved an adequate level of proficiency at this task. And that's good. Moving on.

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So there are plenty of things in your life that you're actually okay with not getting better at. So the million dollar question is, why is running any different for you? Okay, so again, dig deep and find out what is going on. If you are somebody who's like, I'm not making progress and it's driving me crazy, or I'm feeling really bad about myself, these are the questions you should be asking.

And again, I'm not saying it's wrong to want to make progress. I'm speaking to you if you are feeling frustrated or disappointed about not making progress, and you're thinking, "Oh, I should quit running," or, "there's something wrong with me because I'm not getting better."

If you're not making progress, and you're like, "Okay, so what?" Just rock on with your bad self. But if it's driving you crazy, you're feeling frustrated, you're thinking, why should I even bother? These are the questions you should be asking yourself.

So part of the problem with the concept of making progress is that we don't actually define what that means. Right? It's really easy to say we're not getting anywhere, when we aren't actively looking at the facts of the situation, or we're not giving it a long enough time to actually see anything.

If you're driving from New York to LA and you're just driving, but not actually looking at the distance you've gone, you're like, "I don't know, it doesn't feel like I'm getting anywhere. I'm still driving through cornfields. Obviously, I'm not getting anywhere." But meanwhile, you've driven 400 miles. You have to understand what does progress mean and then give it a hot minute to see the evidence of it.

So once you understand why it's important to you to make progress, and you've decided I still want to chase some progress. Okay, give yourself a definition. Does it mean that in a month's time you can run a mile faster than you did before? Or that this month you completed 80% of your

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scheduled workouts as opposed to 70% last month? Decide what progress is before you say you're not getting anywhere. Put some parameters around it so that it is as measurable as possible.

I love using my Garmin for this purpose because it records everything about my run. So I can look back three months and say, "Oh, look, my average heart rate is lower now. Or my pace on my standard three mile route is two minutes faster," whatever. Or I can also see nothing has changed in three months. But guess what, I've been inconsistent. I've only done about half my training runs. So I'm not making progress, but I'm maintaining my fitness.

So give yourself some data so you can evaluate. And also this is the other thing, please don't look for progress from run to run. Give it a fucking minute, my friend. Check in once a month, maybe even longer, because even though you are always making progress, and you are, sometimes you can't see it. And if you can't see it and you're like, "I'm not making progress," again that leads us to quitting. It's normal for things to take time. It's okay. It's part of the process.

Now if you've been working at the same thing for six months straight with consistency, and diligence, and never missing a workout, doing everything your trainer says and you're noticing zero difference, you've looked at all the data and you're like, "there is zero difference," then yeah, maybe it's time to switch things up, okay? But otherwise, let yourself find joy in the work, in the activity, rather than expecting the evidence of progress to bring you that joy.

So, I've got four questions that I want you to ask yourself to get you kind of thinking about this topic a little bit deeper. And they're going to be in the show notes as well. But you can also go over to the show notes and get the questions, you can go to the transcript of this episode, print that out, get the

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questions, or you can just pause and write them down when you get a chance.

But here are some questions to get you thinking a little deeper. Number one, why does making progress matter to you? Okay, why does making progress matter to you? Number two, when is it worth doing something even if you don't get better, even if you don't see progress? When is it worth doing something even if you don't get better?

Number three, what do you make it mean about yourself if you're not seeing evidence of progress? What do you make it mean about yourself if you're not seeing evidence of progress? And number four, what are other ways to assess your progress? What are some other ways that you can look at what you're doing and find evidence of progress?

Again, these questions are going to be in the show notes. But I encourage you to really think about them. Maybe even get out your journal and write down the answers and see what you come up with and see if it shifts anything in your mind.

And one last thing, if you have been struggling to make progress in your running, one thing that can help is to ask a coach and be like, "This is exactly what I've been doing. Why am I not getting anywhere?" Okay? And you can do that by joining the Rebel Runner Roadmap, even if you're not a beginner. For 30 days I'm going to be there coaching you. So you get access to me every week for a whole month, I can help you figure out what's going on.

So make sure you sign up at rebelrunnerroadmap.com because I am saving a seat for you. And if you're a past student of the roadmap, remember you get lifetime access. You get to take it again at no extra cost. No need to re-register, just come to class. But if you're a new student, rebelrunnerroadmap.com. All right?

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Okay, Rebels, I hope this has been a helpful episode for you. If you liked it, please share it on Instagram and let people know. I love you. Stay safe and get your ass out there and run.

Oh, and one last thing, if you enjoyed listening to this episode you have to check out the Rebel Runner Roadmap. It's a 30 day online program that will teach you exactly how to start running, stick with it, and become the runner you've always wanted to be. Head on over to rebelrunnerroadmap.com to join. I'd love to be a part of your journey.