



Stress

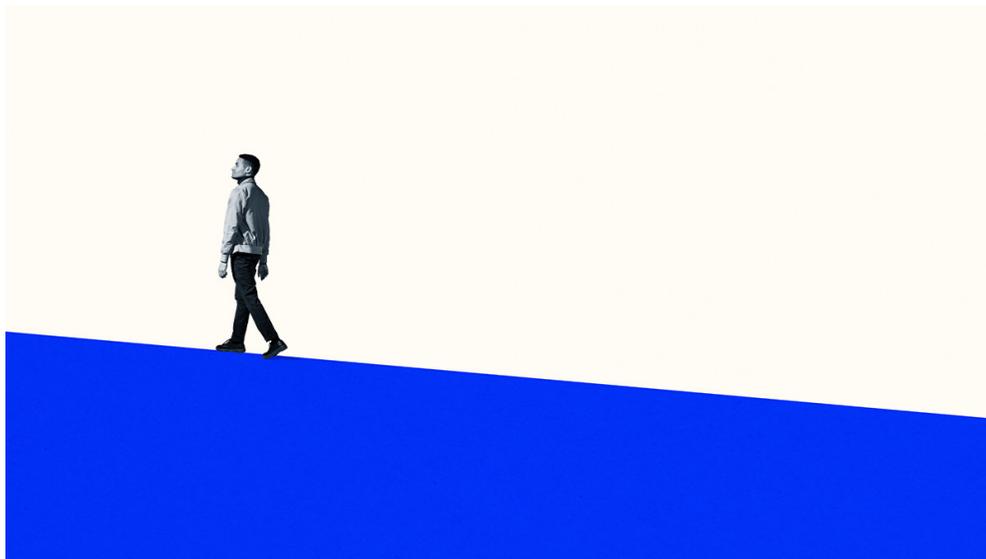
Don't Underestimate the Power of a Walk

by Deborah Grayson Riegel

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Several years ago, I was watching a *Today Show* segment about helping your children and teens create healthy habits. The subject of the piece was a notable nutritionist, whose kids were reluctant to eat their greens and work up a sweat. The most memorable quote came from one of her pre-teens who said, “Walking makes me sad.”

I must admit that, if I think about choosing between catching up on watching *The Crown* or walking, walking would make me sad, too. In fact, if I had to choose between walking and any of my not-so-guilty pleasures

— like baking triple-chocolate brownies or shopping for Japanese pancake molds online (they'll arrive in two days) — I would choose the latter.

But, when I think about the simplest and most strategic thing I am able to do for myself that's Covid-safe, it's walking. When I weigh what activity I can do almost every day, with little preparation, minimal effort, no special equipment, and that can contract or expand to fit the exact amount of time I have available, it's walking. When I consider what I can do for myself even when my back pain is flaring up, it's walking. When I want to do something that's good for my mind, body, and soul, it's walking. When I want someone's company (physically distanced, of course) — or just want to be alone, walking works.

I walk three miles per day, most days of the week, and I'm not alone in reaping the physiological, mental, and emotional rewards of walking. In his *New Yorker* article, "[Why Walking Helps Us Think](#)," journalist Ferris Jabr writes that when we go for a walk, we perform better on tests of [memory and attention](#); our brain cells build [new connections](#), [staving off the usual withering of brain tissue that comes with age](#); we can actively change the pace of our thoughts by deliberately walking more briskly or by slowing down; and our attention is left to meander and observe, helping us generate new ideas and to have strokes of insight. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a single bout of moderate-to vigorous activity (including walking) [can improve our sleep, thinking, and learning](#), while reducing symptoms of anxiety.

And doing it outdoors can compound the dividends. According to Dr. Jo Barton, Senior Lecturer of the School of Sport, Rehabilitation and Exercise Sciences at the University of Essex, [you can improve your self-esteem and your mood with just five minutes of exposure to nature](#). Why does it work so quickly? As Barton shares, exposure to nature helps us switch from voluntary attention, which draws on our reserves of focus and energy, to involuntary attention, which requires less focus and energy. This allows us to recover from mental fatigue.

Charles Darwin, Friedrich Nietzsche, William Wordsworth, and Aristotle were all obsessive walkers, using the rhythm of walking to help them generate ideas. And while any form of exercise has been shown to activate the brain, walking is a proven creativity booster as well.

Let me also say this: as simple as walking seems, I know it's not simple for everyone. Some people have mobility challenges that make walking an ordeal, or even impossible. Others may live in neighborhoods that are unsafe for walking, while others may have experienced trauma that make walking alone or outside feel threatening. Some of us have responsibilities at home that limit our independence, and others may have weather conditions that make exposure uncomfortable or risky. If you fall into one or more of those categories — or a category I have missed — I hope you find something that you use to quiet your anxiety, keep your brain sharp, and maintain physical well-being.

For those of us who *can* walk, we know that we can walk for exercise and for transportation. And here are five additional ways to walk with purpose:

1. Walk for perspective. These are trying times. The global pandemic has robbed so many of us of so much, and yet, most of us can still find perspective in the struggle. On days when I need some perspective, I'll stroll while looking at the sun, the trees, or the water. Those views remind me to reflect on the expanse of the universe, to appreciate the beauty of nature, and prompt me to consider how much world there still is for me to explore (when it's safe to do so).

2. Walk for connection. While you *can* walk alone, you don't have to. And these days, walking is one of the safer activities available to us. Before I moved from New York to North Carolina, I had a standing Sunday walk with my neighbor Leslie. And now, despite being almost 600 miles apart, we still have our Sunday morning walks — just over the phone. Invite a friend or family member to join you — in person when it's doable, safe, and responsible — and over the phone when it isn't.

3. Walk for learning. As much as I like to clear my mind, I also like to fill it with new and useful information. I might walk while listening to a podcast or an audio book, or even the recording of a webinar I signed up for but wasn't able to attend. Or I might take some photos with my phone of a tree or an animal I can't identify (which, as a native Manhattanite, are most trees and animals), and look it up when I get home.

4. Walk for gratitude. As someone who has experienced both chronic and acute back pain, I often walk with a focus on how lucky I feel to be able to walk — and the relief of being pain-free. I will focus on the gift of feeling safe (most of the time) as a woman walking alone. Or that I have a clean, hot shower waiting for me at the end of my walk. Or I might even focus on the gift of being alive right now, when so many have died.

5. Walk for productivity. Sometimes I'll arrange a coaching call with a client who has also committed to walk and talk. Or I might schedule a networking call with a client who is walking, too. I am also productive when I walk, and sometimes dictate brainstorming ideas, or even a new article, into my phone's voice recorder. When I come home, I have something I can cross off my to-do list, in addition to that day's walk.

And sometimes, I have to let go of my goals and let the walk's purpose reveal itself to me. This happens most often when I'm walking with my rescue dog Nash, and she wants to follow a squirrel.

Here's the bottom line: Walk when you can, where you can. Your body, mind, and soul will thank you for it.



Deborah Grayson Riegel is a professional speaker, as well as a communication and presentation skills coach. She has taught for Wharton Business School, Columbia Business School, and Duke Corporate Education. She is the author of *Overcoming Overthinking: 36 Ways to Tame Anxiety for Work, School, and Life*.