



WALKING To Improve Mental Health

by Wendy Nadherny Fachon

It's not surprising that walking is the most popular form of exercise in America. It is a simple, easy and free way to help relieve stress and boost mental health. Physicians even recommend regular walking (and other forms of exercise) as a natural way to treat depression due to the body's ability to produce and release its own happy drugs, called endorphins. Plus, temporarily placing some physical and mental distance from a stressful environment or situation helps alleviate tension.

So just what is it about walking that entices so many? For starters, walking easily settles into a natural stride and rhythm. The heart beats while the arms and legs pump, while varying levels of exertion promote deeper breathing. When walking outdoors, the fresh air helps to cleanse the lungs and clear the mind. Meanwhile the mind can wander at will, take time to think and work through problems and solutions, or simply take time to just *be*.

A variety of studies over the years have shown that walking in a natural setting can be particularly healing. Trees release doses of oxygen, natural chemicals and aromas that promote a healthier mindset. Birds and flowers uplift spirits and inspire creativity. Plus, connecting with nature through awareness sharpens cognitive abilities.

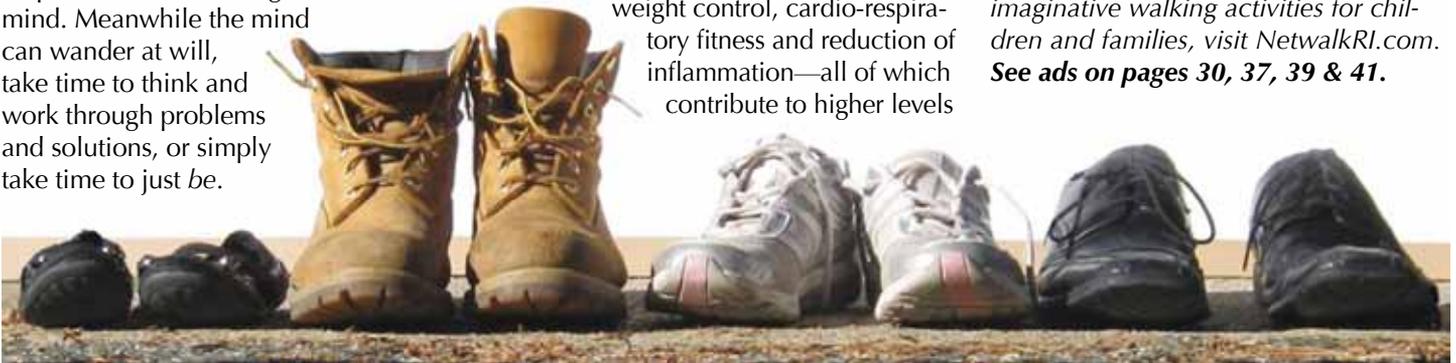
Walking can be done alone or with a walking partner. Walking solo can help us clear our heads and find peace. Our minds work effortlessly, often bringing great ideas or coming up with solutions to problems. On the other hand, walking buddies tend to share feelings, empathize with one another, help analyze problems, suggest ideas and work out solutions. Friends laugh, uplift and teach one another through stories.

Making a commitment to walk just 30 minutes per day can help with weight control, cardio-respiratory fitness and reduction of inflammation—all of which contribute to higher levels

of immunity from illness, including mental illness. If 30 minutes per day seems like too much, a walker can begin with 15 minutes per day and add 5 minutes to the routine each week. It is also helpful to invite neighbors or friends to go along as conversation often makes the time go by quickly. It is not uncommon to go walking with a friend and suddenly realize that an hour has passed.

In a society that is incredibly fast-paced, overloaded with information, and replete with economic stress, 30 minutes of walking can actually buy back time by rejuvenating the body, clearing the mind and calming the soul.

Storywalker, Wendy Nadherny Fachon, volunteers in implementing afterschool programs that encourage fitness, creative thinking, and a positive mental attitude. For information, including imaginative walking activities for children and families, visit NetwalkRI.com. See ads on pages 30, 37, 39 & 41.



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