

Mindful Walking

So, you're not a walker—you don't exercise or you like a more rigorous form of exercise. And of course, you don't have time. JOIN THE CLUB! These are reasonable excuses. The crazy thing? Whether routine or required, walking rewards your mind and body. Adding mindfulness can turn your walks into a sacred practice that refreshes and invigorates.

Walk with INTENTION – Intention provides focus and motivation. Whether your intent is getting fresh air, reducing stress, or working up a sweat—identify your intention for the day. Tomorrow's intent may be different and that's okay! As long as you're aware of it when you venture out on that walk! Set gradual goals consistent with the larger goal of experiencing the walk— frequency, distance, exploring new places, etc.

Walk with CONSISTENCY – Some days it feels great and some days you'll resist. Inclement weather, achy joints, hectic schedules---this is the inertia of the moment that'll knock you off track of your bigger, truer intention. Set a timer, commit to walk with a friend or your dog, or make an appointment with yourself in your daily planner. However you do it, make your true intention a priority and make space for it in your week.

Walk WHERE you want –Whether it's around the block, the office building or at one of Lake County's many nature preserves—get outside for your walks. Experts associate spending more time surrounded by nature with well-being. Use walking as an excuse to explore your natural surroundings or new areas! Did you know Lake County Forest Preserves has 25,000 acres of natural preserved space with miles of trails awaiting your walking adventures? Check out preserves close to you at www.lcfd.org/preserves.

The Mind and Body of Mindful Walking:

THE WANDERING MIND—The focus here is being present on your walk and keeping your walk a pleasurable experience. The benefit, of course, is giving your mind a respite from the rest of the day which adds balance and refreshes the spirit. Be kind to yourself. Treat your mind as a child that occasionally gets distracted and needs to be gently redirected. Berating yourself for a wandering mind takes you further from your purpose of the walk. Try a strategy below for keeping your mind on your purpose:

Find a meaningful poem, verse, quote, etc. and dwell on it—repeat verses with the rhythm of your steps. (Let your body dictate the rhythm with a comfortable pace.)

Count your blessings as you walk. Need more structure? Go through the alphabet by naming a blessing that begins with each letter.

Find and contemplate something new along your path—a tree, an architectural feature on a neighbor's house, a new model of car, a garden. The simple act of searching for something new and interesting keeps you present.

Identify the birds you see. Don't know the bird names? Make some up or make a mental note of the characteristics and look them up in a bird book later.

Focus on the physical sensation of walking. See below.

THE WANDERING BODY—you learned to walk when you were one. So, what is to learn? This walking practice is half mental, half physical, so each must be given proper attention. Mindful walking means listening to your body which, as a culture, we rarely do. Just as you treat a wandering mind gently, treat your physical being gently too.

If you are achy, too cold, too hot, too winded during your walks, you're less inclined to stick to your intended purpose and those physical symptoms may only add to the burdens of the day. So, during your walks, check in with your body. Feel the sensation of walking from your soles hitting the ground to the breeze on your face. *Be prepared to respond.* Here are a few strategies:

Watch your posture and keep your body in straight alignment. Picture your skeletal structure as you walk and tweak it as you go. Whenever you tweak, how does it feel?

Concentrate on your breathing—it should be smooth and consistent. Note how many steps you take on each breath and whether you breathe through your nose or mouth.

Try pulling your lower abdominals in, tuck your rearend in and tilt the pubic bone up. Picture your pelvis as a bowl full of liquid that you don't want to spill. This keeps the pelvis level and strengthens the core muscles adding stability. Your joints are held by muscle—the more stable the muscles, the more stable the joints.

Try shortening your stride. A longer stride does not a faster, further walk make. Keeping a comfortably short stride keeps the body collected whether walking fast or slow. Speed is achieved by increasing the number of steps per minute, not longer strides.

Try focusing on extending your legs behind you instead of kicking your foot out with each step. This allows your leg muscles behind your leg to stretch before they constrict and keeps your body in better alignment.

Feeling winded? Slow down, shorten your stride and use your arms to help propel you. Keep them close to your sides to avoid stressing your shoulders.

Be prepared for the conditions. Wear the right clothes, bring along water, protect your skin and eyes. Comfortable shoes are a must. Layers are good so you can shed as you heat up during the walk and tie it around your waste. Whether it's wearing sunglasses, a visor, sunscreen, lip balm, or band aids on blisters. Make your walking gear easy to access for the conditions of the day.

Allow for days of more and less energy. Adjust your physical exertion accordingly.

*adapted from <http://www.explorefaith.org/>