

Walking to Wellness



Exercise for Physical and Emotional Health Second Edition

Participant Workbook: Integrating Mindfulness Into Walking Activities

Barbara Stetson, Ph.D., Ashley McDaniel, M.A., Patricia Dubbert, Ph.D.



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This document can be downloaded at <https://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn16/walking-to-wellness-manuals.asp>.

To request a hardcopy of this document or submit questions for the authors, please contact VISN16SCMIRECCEducation@va.gov.

Mindful Walking

What is Mindfulness and Mindful Walking?

Mindfulness is a widely practiced technique that can teach you to be aware of your thoughts and feelings in the present moment. There are several techniques, such as sitting mindfulness meditation, breathing, body scans and mindful movements. Many studies have found that mindfulness techniques help reduce stress and negative emotions while increasing positive emotions and well-being. Studies have also found that mindfulness meditation effects the body's physical stress response. Using these techniques can bring about positive health results for many people.

Mindfulness encourages you to be present and nonjudgmental. For some, this is a change from rushing through the day, worrying, or focusing on past or future events. Using a mindful approach, you learn to slow down, observe, and enjoy what is happening at the present time. You avoid thinking ahead, planning, or judging your thoughts or actions. You also guide your attention to observe your thoughts and the sensations you are experiencing, such as your breathing or movements. Remain distant from any concerns you have about these thoughts or sensations. With practice, this useful skill can improve your wellness by promoting a positive mood and sense of well-being.



Mindful Walking

How Does Mindful Walking Combine the Benefits of Walking and Mindfulness Approaches to Wellness?

You can benefit from using mindfulness approaches while you walk. *Mindful walking* promotes general mindfulness through movement. It helps you focus on and be aware of your body. It also enhances the sensations you feel during movement and how you experience your surroundings.

Movement is purposeful in mindful walking. Your pace may be slower than normal. Your goal is not to get somewhere. This is a journey that brings your full attention to the activity of walking. You should ignore distractions like planning meals, coming up with ideas, or worrying. This will allow you to be in the moment and savor the sensations that come along with walking.

Many people walk to work through problems or quickly get to where they need to be. However, mindful walking is slow and focused only on the act of walking. It may be done outside in city locations, nature settings or indoors.

Mindful walking can even be helpful for brief periods. Many studies have shown that brief physical activity sessions can improve mood and physical health. Further, mindful walking can help reduce stress for a variety of people.



Mindful Walking

What Do We Know About the Benefits of Mindful Walking?

Studies show that people of all ages can develop mindful walking skills. This includes healthy people and those who have health challenges. These skills can help them focus on the present, cope with stressful emotions and support a regular walking routine.

Other studies have explored the benefits of mindful walking for mood. Study participants tracked their mood and practices in smartphone apps. The benefits found for mindful walking included reduced stress, increased positive mood and sleep quality, and decreased rumination on negative thoughts or worry.

Mindful walking was found to improve blood pressure, blood sugar level and blood vessel functioning in individuals living with diabetes. It also resulted in healthier and safer knee and form-of-leg movements in people with blood pressure issues who were developing an activity program.

Studies of people with mobility problems, such as knee osteoarthritis or back pain, showed that the activities were doable for the participants. One study of older adults who had trouble with balance found that mindful walking was as helpful as a balance training program.



Mindful Walking

How Do You Begin Mindful Walking?

Start mindful walking by slowing down your movements and taking slow, deep and steady breaths. Notice how your body feels as you breathe. Use mindful attention to focus on the present moment without evaluating or judging things. Try not to rush through the walk, plan, solve problems or think about the past or future.

Mindful walking is purposeful and slower than your normal pace. You will be able to notice things about walking that you normally might not pay attention to, such as:

- The movement of your legs and feet lifting up and moving forward, your heels touching the ground, and your footsteps rolling forward from heel to toes.
- The feeling of your muscles or arms swinging back and forth.
- The sensory details in your surroundings. Perhaps you hear the crunch of leaves, smell the grass after rain, or feel the carpet under your feet or wind on your face.

The goal of this practice is to learn to focus your attention on aspects of your walking and sensations that you might not usually notice while you walk.

It is normal for your mind to wander during walking. You might find yourself thinking about past events, planning, or engaging in negative thinking. If that occurs, simply notice that your mind is wandering and return your focus to the sensations of walking without judging your actions. It may take time to adapt to using these skills but they are beneficial. The “Mindful Walking Tip Sheet” on page 5 can help you get started. You might also search a smartphone app store for mindfulness and mindful walking apps to use during your walks.



Tip Sheet: Mindful Walking

These tips can help Walking to Wellness participants who are interested in integrating mindfulness approaches into their walking activities.

1. Set aside at least 10 minutes when you don't expect to be interrupted and can attend to your mindful attentional focus.
2. Decide where you can walk safely and be undisturbed. If outdoors, you could mindfully walk on a park trail, a track, a rural road or on a sidewalk. If you decide to mindfully walk at home, it is fine to walk short distances back and forth inside — this could be around your house or within a room or down your hallway, driveway, or around your yard. It doesn't have to be the same place or even outdoors or indoors each time.
3. Wear comfortable clothes and shoes.
4. Being mindful means paying attention to what is happening in the present moment. Slowly take a few deep breaths and exhale, and gradually bring your awareness to how it feels to be standing with your feet on the ground beneath you. Notice your slow and steady breathing.
5. Bring your awareness to your body. Notice the position of your arms and legs and your balance from side to side and front to back. Notice the sensation of your feet in your shoes and your weight in your heels and the balls of your feet.



Tip Sheet: Mindful Walking

6. Begin your walking movements slowly and with intention. Notice how moving slower than your normal pace focuses your attention on the many sensations involved in each step.
7. Notice the sensations in your feet and legs – the point of mindful walking is to shift your attention to the present – Notice your foot touching the ground, pay attention to the movement of your arms, notice the rhythm of your movement and the feelings of the bottom of your feet, the muscles in your legs as you take each step.
8. Notice what you are experiencing in your environment – what you are seeing, what you are smelling or hearing. Do you see leaves on the ground in front of your feet? Do you feel the wind on your face?
9. You will likely find that at times your thoughts will drift to other things such as making plans or solving problems or mulling over things from the past or perhaps to discomfort, such as stiffness in your knee. Notice these thoughts without judging them and gently guide your mind back to your mindful walking focus and attention to the sensations of your body moving or your breath as you walk.
10. Notice whether you are judging your experience of walking, such as thinking you're not doing this the right way or moving too fast or too slowly. When that occurs, just return your focus to your body and movements. Consider the sounds and sensations of your feet striking the ground and lifting up, moving out and ahead, back, and down or the sounds and textures that you notice with each step.
11. When your mindful walking time ends, stop and focus on your body as you are standing still; and notice whatever sensations and feelings arise, without judgment.
12. Be patient with yourself and adopting mindful walking. It takes practice to cultivate mindfulness and mindful movement. Try mindful walking in various places at different times and consider what you have tried and what you learn from your different approaches.

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