



WALKING AND MENTAL WELL-BEING

By

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Even in the best of times, millions of Americans of all ages (about 20%) are living with a mental disorder, and many millions more are suffering from emotional distress that may not meet criteria for diagnosis as a mental illness but is painful and makes their lives difficult to bear.

And these, of course, are not the best of times. During the pandemic, numerous surveys show, there has been a vast increase in the numbers of people with symptoms of depression and anxiety and an even greater increase in the numbers of people experiencing significant emotional distress.

Mental health organizations have put out lots of tip sheets for how to deal with emotional distress. Eat well, sleep well, get exercise, give yourself a break, and practice "mindfulness" (whatever that is) are on all of them.

All good advice that I'm afraid doesn't speak to people who are living with grief for deaths before their time, people who were wiped out economically, people juggling work with kids at home, or people trapped in isolation.

My view is that good advice is easy to give and hard to take. I hope that my advice today will not fall into that category.

My advice, which will come as no surprise given that I'm speaking at Walktober, get out and walk.

Obviously, walking is good exercise, and exercise is good for the body. But what does walking do to reduce psychological distress and to promote psychological well-being?

Let me use myself as an example. Like many, many others I am given to depression, a tendency much exacerbated by the state of the world. When I get depressed, I ruminate about things that seem very important to me. Over and over, why did I do that dumb or insensitive thing? How am I going

to get everything done that I absolutely have to do? And so forth. The more time I spend by myself in my apartment, the more important these disturbing questions seem to me. They clutter my thoughts and agitate me.

What helps? Getting out of myself. Walking is one way in which I do this. Not pacing my apartment, which just makes things worse, but walking outside. In bad weather, I get some relief just walking the halls of my apartment house. Even that slight change of environment helps to clear my head a bit. Better, of course, is when I walk around the harbor in Baltimore, where I have the good fortune to live. I like the water and the boats, I like seeing people going about their lives, I like running into someone I know and stopping to chat for a while. It all helps me to get away from a painfully pessimistic sense of the world that builds in my mind when I'm alone.

That's the core of it. You have to get outside to get out of your head.

Where outside? Some people swear by nature walks. They need to escape the noise and tension of city streets; they find peace in forests and vistas. Me? Not so much.

So where should you walk? That's a subjective matter.

As I say this, I am painfully aware that many people don't have much opportunity to take a safe walk in their neighborhoods, not even in parks that were designed originally to provide haven from slum living but have often become ill-kempt and dangerous. Nor can they jump in the car and go to a state park. It's very troubling that for something as presumably affordable as walking, poverty matters.

I won't dwell on that today.

Emotional Distress and Mental Illness

Let's look a bit more abstractly at the value of walking for dealing with emotional distress.

As I have already said, walking outside can help you get away from painful thoughts and feelings that are at the core of emotional distress and mental illness.

In addition, walking can help to counteract the psychological effects of social isolation, which include loneliness and increased rates of mood and anxiety disorders. Walking with other people or even watching other people reduce the sense of disconnection. And for some people, walking with a spouse or partner can be a good way to deal with issues between them or to experience a special kind of intimacy.

It can also help people who choose to live in isolation because they are very depressed or because they have a paranoid sense of the dangers outside of their own home.

For example, I once heard a psychiatric expert on mental illness in old age say that he had more hope for paranoid patients who lived in isolation but had dogs than for those who had cats because you have to walk a dog. Again, walking takes you out of your own head and provides a bit of contact with reality even for people who otherwise shut themselves off from the outside world.

It is also important to note that the physical benefits of walking have psychological benefits. For example, weight loss, which can be an outcome of walking, can contribute to increased self-esteem. Reduced pain, which can also be an outcome of walking, can vastly improve mood and contribute to a rediscovery of hope which is often overwhelmed by chronic pain. Similarly, the experience of physical ability that comes with walking can help to counteract the sense of demoralization that people recovering from an illness or an injury often live with. And increased blood flow to the brain can help to clear the mental cobwebs.

In general, exercise, including walking, contributes to reduced stress, improved sleep, reduced fatigue and increased energy, and improved mood, ability to concentrate, and clarity of thought.

Dementia

There is also some evidence that walking and other forms of exercise can delay the onset of dementia. A good reason to get out and walk! But even after a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease or another dementia, people can get much the same physical and psychological benefits of exercise and walking as those without dementia, though it can be a bit more complicated because of the fear that people with Alzheimer's and other dementias will wander away and get lost if they are allowed to walk freely.

First, it is important to be clear that this fear is not warranted for many people in the early stages of dementia, who retain many of the cognitive capacities that they had earlier in their lives.

But as dementia progresses, it is important for people to be in familiar environments and to develop routines. So, the question where to walk becomes very important. There need to be "paths", as it were, that are attractive and satisfying and that don't have appealing exits to areas where the walker can get lost.

In addition, it is important to understand that people with dementia who are wandering away from their usual paths may be doing so for a simple human reason, not because they have dementia. Perhaps they are lonely. Perhaps they are bored. Perhaps they are hungry. Perhaps they have a tooth ache and have a vague memory of a dentist nearby. I had a neighbor years ago who used to get dressed up to go to the movies. We tenants all knew to show her back to her apartment.

So, yes walking is good for people with dementia and there are ways to make it safe, but caregivers do need to be thoughtful about it.

Positive Psychological Development

So far, I have been talking about the value of walking for dealing with emotional distress, mental illness, and cognitive impairment. That's the negative side of psychology. But there's also a positive side of psychology, which is about the development of psychological characteristics that contribute to well-being.

Needless to say, there's a very long list of positive psychological characteristics. The father of positive psychology Martin Seligman puts them into 5 categories: pleasurable feelings (happiness), social connections, engagement in activities, achievement, and meaning. I would add such characteristics as compassion, devotion to family and community, integrity, self-worth, hopefulness, and the experience of transcendence.

What does walking contribute to the development and to maintaining these characteristics? Some of it strikes me as obvious. Walking makes many people happy. Often people walk in groups; it is a source of social connection. Many people find it an engaging activity in its own right. And some people pursue it in a way that gives them a feeling of achievement. 2 blocks the first outing, now 3 miles a day.

Some of it I think is less obvious. What, for example, does walking contribute to having a sense of meaning in life?

A recent research study looked at a type of walking called "awe walks". These are walks in nature, during which the walker consciously thinks about how awesome nature is. How beautiful! How grand! And how small we are as individuals in comparison to the towering redwoods or expanse of the ocean! How much greater nature is than we as individuals!

You might think, as some existentialists did, that seeing ourselves as small in a vast universe of space and time would make us feel meaningless. But this research says that, quite the contrary, walking in nature with a sense of awe made the participants feel part of something bigger and more eternal

than themselves. And, the research report claims, they felt happier, more compassionate, more grateful for their lives, more generous, and more humble. They also had a greater “sense of wonder and appreciation of the details of the world.”

The point of this study was that it is not just walking in nature that promotes positive psychological experience. It is also the attitude you bring to it.

It leads me to wonder whether you can bring an attitude of awe to a walk in an urban neighborhood as well as to a walk in nature.

It also leads me to wonder whether there are other attitudes that you can bring to a walk that would lead to a sense of meaning.

For example, if you walk with a sense of social justice, what would be the impact on the development of compassion, political action, and other social sources of meaning? I don't know of research about that, but I would bet that if we look at the world we see along our walks with compassion, concern, and an impulse to action, the experience might help lift us beyond ourselves to a moral state that can be a tremendous source of personal well-being.

And am entirely certain that if we walk with the eye of an artist for the beauty that is visible to those who are prepared to see it, we can have an experience of aesthetic pleasure and even of transcendence that can also be a tremendous source of emotional well-being.

Walking can do all that if we let it.

So get out and walk!