



WHY WALK ?

(THE BENEFITS OF WALKING)



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An Adventure That May Surprise You

What will you experience on your own journey? What will you learn about yourself? Who will you be when you return from a long-distance trek (or thru hike)? This paper discusses the latest findings regarding the health benefits of walking and its historical and cultural significance.

Why is distance walking so good for us?!

Long-distance walking is an eco-friendly, inexpensive way of travelling. It provides an opportunity for adventure that may surprise you. Take a moment to imagine leaving on a long-distance trek. What will you experience on this journey? What will you learn about yourself? Who will you be when you return?

Why would you consider taking a long-distance walking journey? What are the benefits? This paper discusses the latest findings regarding the health benefits of walking and its historical and cultural significance. We hope this information will help you understand why long-distance walking is so transformative.

This quote from Carol Welch sums up the potential metamorphic power of movement: *“Movement is the medicine that creates change in a person’s physical, emotional and mental states”*. In his book *In Praise of Walking*, neuroscientist, Shane O’Mara adds that *“no other medicine has so much positive effect on the body. In addition, Drugs come with side effect. Movement does not.”*

Physiological Benefits:

Homo Sapiens were made to walk. Because our great toes are not opposing, as our thumbs are, we tolerate an upright posture and walking more than other primates. Our bodies are designed to move. We thrive on physical activity. Our organs get significant blood flow from the diaphragm’s pumping action occasioned by breathing deeply while standing and moving. This aids in proper functioning, better transport of nutrition and oxygen to all our cells and flushing out of toxins. As well, our nervous system receives an increased blood flow with movement, creating a more alert mind.

Historically, we lived in natural settings. Research on hunter-gatherer tribes show that the hunters walk on average 10 to 15 km per day and the gatherers walk 8-10 km per day. These groups typically do not suffer from obesity or show signs of chronic health problems common in urban, sedentary groups.

Technology has dramatically changed our environment and activities of daily living. Our urban settings cause environmental stresses such as pollution, overstimulation of our senses, and higher population density. This leads to increased production of cortisol (stress hormone), reduced immune system function, and can lead to chronic illness.

As well, being sedentary causes havoc with our health. Research has linked sitting for long periods of time with several health concerns. These include obesity and a cluster of conditions that make up metabolic syndromes.



Too much sitting overall and prolonged periods of sitting also seem to increase the risk of death from cardiovascular disease and cancer.

More and more studies show the benefits of living a more active life, at a slower pace, with increased interactions with natural settings.

Japan's National Health Board studied Shinrin-Yoku, or nature bathing. They assessed millions of individuals exercising regularly in natural settings. The participants were tested for cortisol levels, heart rate, blood pressure and other health parameters. The test subjects were followed for many years to track their disease and aging processes.

The findings showed that participant's cortisol levels decreased significantly. Their heart rate and blood pressure lowered post exposure to nature, and rates of chronic illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes II, gastrointestinal disorders, and gestational fetal growth were positively affected.

These studies suggest possible reasoning for the noted findings:

- Increased physical activity
- Exposure to sunlight
- Breathing cleaner, less polluted air
- Inhaling Phytoncides

These chemicals are emitted by plants. They have been shown to decrease the occurrence of chronic illnesses. Phytoncides also boost the immune system, specifically by increasing the production of the Natural Killer Cells. This type of White Blood Cells fight infections, viruses, and cancer cells.

This alone makes walking in nature a worthy activity!

The above-mentioned studies focus on individuals nature-walking for one hour a few times a week. If we consider distance walking, which incorporates daily walks of 20 km or more per day for a month or more, it has transformational powers beyond the physical. This type of slow, progressive travel leads naturally through three phases. These phases are physical, emotional, and mental/spiritual. Note that this is not a linear process. Each phase will ebb and flow in intensity. They may linger for days or pass within a few hours. As the journey progresses, we experience each phase more deeply as we titrate through the experience of the journey.

As the journey begins, we face the physical phase. Our bodies build endurance through the challenge of walking significant distances daily. We experience aches and pains during the first week that will keep our attention on our bodies. As we gradually get accustomed to the demands of the trail, we get into 'trail shape'. These aches and pains recede and allow our attention to shift to the other phases. The journey gradually moves inwards.



Emotional Healing:

As the journey progresses, we have time to look inward and work through any personal experiences that may have caused us grief in the past. If we take advantage of this process, we will feel lighter and freer.

The repetitive nature of walking leads into a state of meditative contemplation. Moderate exercise, such as walking, has been shown to boost the production of Beta-endorphins. These

neurotransmitters generate a lower pain

response, a sense of wellbeing, and even euphoria. Walking is an amazing tool because of this physiological process. It is so dependable that it is now being used in the psychosomatic healing process.

Studies on the effect of walking on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) sufferers found that total symptoms of PTSD: depression, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and stress were reduced with *“time spent walking in nature,”* as opposed to strength training in a gym. The relationship between reduction of symptoms and time spent walking was directly correlated, meaning that symptoms of PTSD decreased as time spent walking increased. There are now programs encouraging people suffering from PTSD to walk in natural settings. An example of this, in the US, is veterans walking extended parts of the Appalachian Trail as part of their healing process.

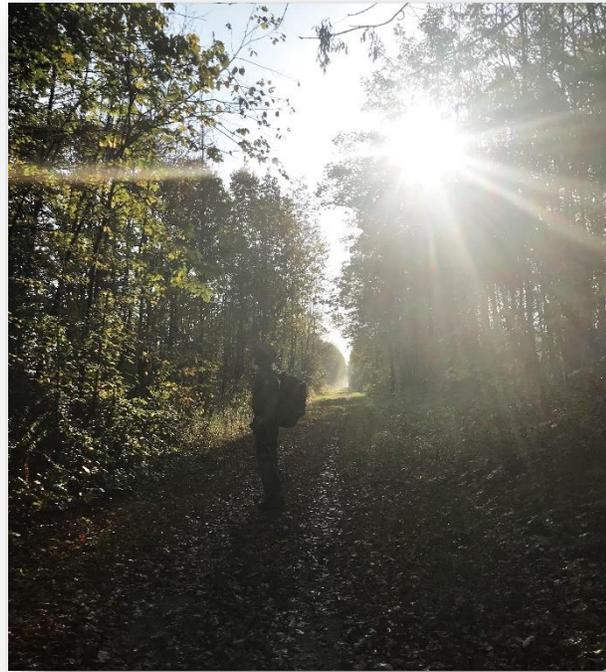
Mental and Spiritual Transformation:

In the past, humans used walking as a means of travel. They must have felt the euphoric state that is induced naturally by walking. Societies developed rituals involving walking which were imbedded into their cultures to aid in periods of transition. From the rites of passage, such as the Walk-About of aboriginal youths, the religious pilgrimages, such as the Camino de Santiago, to the modern-day protest marches, humans have found a deeper understanding of their ‘humanness’ through walking. It is worth looking at these ceremonies and their role in the transformative healing process.

The ritual participants must leave their community for a period. They then "stand at the threshold" between their previous way of structuring their identity, time, or community, and a

new way, which completing the rite establishes. This is where creative changes can occur. As the participants rejoin their community, they reintegrate as a 'changed' person and take on new roles and ways of viewing their society.

If we compare distance-walking to these rituals, we can see the similarities. As we leave our urban lives and adopt a trail persona, we truly are different aspects of ourselves. The long periods of time spent separated from our communities allows us to undergo significant changes on the physical and emotional levels. When we return to our lives, we experience a sense of disorientation as we adjust our new view of who we are and the roles we play in our communities.



Recently, there is an interest in re-incorporating these important rituals to regain connection with others, community, and the environment. Anthropologist Thomas Maschio observed the link between natural surroundings and the history of many populations. He categorised this topogeny. This form of history relates to the whole community walking and living through their environment in a migration of sorts and creates a sense of identity for the group. The community is intrinsically linked to their natural environment. This sense of connection with others and with the environment offers a deep understanding of who they are and how they fit into the world. Through topogeny, distance walkers recognise each other as part of the greater whole.

Distance walking offers this chance for change. It is transformative physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. Considering the health benefits and the opportunity for emotional healing, distance-walking is a perfect backdrop for a life-changing adventure. Through distance walking, we face our limits and surpass them. We learn the importance to staying in the moment and facing challenges in creative ways.

We hope that this article has piqued your interest, and that you will consider attempting your own distance-walking journey.

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