



Walking and Creativity

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The day is bright. Spring has poked its head up and is pouring forth its joyful blend of warmth, fresh air and amazing scents. The outdoors beckon and before you know it, you have your coat on and are headed outdoors for a walk. And as you walk you notice....the sticky conversation you had with your boss now seems easier to understand and you know just what to do to bring things back into balance. You remember that story you wrote as a kid and your imagination is flowing with new ideas to make that story into a book. You figure out the perfect place for your next family vacation, even though this subject has caused some friction between your family members. In short, you are having a big, beautiful wave of creative thinking.

What is it about walking that activates our minds and imaginations? The answer begins with changes to our body chemistry. When we walk, the heart pumps faster, sending more blood to entire system including our brains. Walking stimulates new connections between brain cells and boosts both attention and memory. There is a fluidity that starts to happen with the imagination that is a natural response to this brain activity. Walking at our own pace creates an amazing loop of connections between the rhythm of our steps and our thinking. You can actually change the rate of new thoughts forming, simply by walking faster or slowing down.

If you walk in a place with a flat surface (as opposed to a woody hillside where you will need to watch your feet) your attention is free to wander, and as your attention wanders, so do your thoughts. Times like these make the mind more open to eureka moments and bursts of insight.

The connection between walking and creativity has been known for centuries with even Henry David Thoreau proclaiming, "Methinks the moment my legs begin to move, my thoughts begin to flow." And it has been estimated that the poet William Wordsworth walked as many as one hundred and eighty thousand miles in his lifetime, an average of six and a half miles a day. Even Thomas Jefferson, surely one of history's greatest thinkers believed "of all the exercises, walking is the best."

The power of walking to unleash creativity is well known in the business world. Many leaders of industry have been known to take walking meetings, among them Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg and Barak Obama. Walking meetings often break down the barriers between workers and management, improve communication, heighten worker satisfaction and engagement and just plain make people happier. And happier people are more productive, creative and all around healthier.

A big fan of walking meetings is the CEO of Western Union, Hikmet Ersek. He says, “People become much more relaxed, and they talk from their hearts if you go for a walk with them. And they get to the point they want to make much more quickly.”

Although walking outdoors in nature offers a huge variety of benefits, researchers from Stanford University have discovered that either walking outdoors or indoors helps your creative thinking flow. It is the act of walking itself that gets creativity going, rather than the location where the walk is taking place. And it has been proven that walking boosts creativity hugely over sitting.

It is truly wonderful to think that something as simple as walking is more than just exercise. It can be a kickstart to broader thinking and problem solving and when done with friends, can be a great bonding experience.

You don't necessarily have to walk for a long time to reap the benefits. Consider taking even a ten minute walk a day – five minutes out and five minutes back. You will be amazed at how quickly such an activity will freshen your perspective. Look around your office and see if walking a few laps of the perimeter of the room will spark some ease and great ideas for you. No matter where you do it or for how long, walking is a winning activity. Why not stand up and head out for a walk right now?

