

# Take Your Mind for a Walk

WALKING HAS IT ALL – it burns calories, strengthens muscles, carries a low risk of injury, builds denser bones, is easy on fragile joints, requires little preparation or equipment and can be done anywhere. And that’s not all. If you engage your mind through a method called “walking meditation,” you may find that getting great exercise is only the beginning of the experience.

Walking meditation, also called mindful walking, combines the basic principles of meditation, such as breathing, concentration and relaxation with rhythmic walking. “As with traditional meditation, walking meditation can reduce your blood pressure and heart rate, create feelings of well-being, help you sleep, improve your mood and help you manage stress,” says Shirley Archer, a fitness expert who teaches walking meditation workshops at Stanford University in Palo Alto, Calif.

Walking meditation is fairly new to the United States, having originated with Buddhist monks, but there are a growing number of classes and workshops now available. Even the corporate world is engaging in mindful walking: Some businesses incorporate group walking meditation in team-building events and company wellness programs.

For workshops in your area, check with gyms, yoga studios, meditation centers, community colleges, universities, spas that have fitness activities and Buddhist educational centers.

## WALKING FOR LIFE: The First Step

If you’ve never made walking a habit, start with the opportunity that’s in front of you right now: Take one step. You’ll reveal the unlimited power you have over your health and wellness, says Karen S. Danner, a life and wellness coach based in Phoenix and author of *Life Moves: Exercise for the Love of the Lifestyle* (Good Press, 2004). As you walk, pay attention to your body, getting to know its movements.

Become aware of how your body responds to exercise. Feel your tissues warming up and your joints becoming less stiff. Feel your lungs pulling in more air and your heart working harder. “As your self-observation increases, so does your confidence, which fires up further motivation and momentum,” says Danner.

To stay engaged, Danner recommends injecting personal meaning into your walking experience. For example, walk to reconnect with nature by looking for wildlife or walk with purpose, such as training for a fundraising walk like the Arthritis Walk. “You will see improvements in yourself and your health as walking becomes part of your lifestyle,” she says.



If you can’t find a class or want to go solo, Archer makes the following suggestions:

**FIND A SPOT.** Choose a place, indoors or outdoors, where you feel confident and can walk comfortably.

**FIND YOUR BREATH.** Walk slowly and focus on your breathing. Count the number of steps you take as you inhale and exhale. Take four steps on the inhale and four on the exhale.

**FIND A MANTRA.** Say a phrase to yourself (one word for each step) such as, “I am at peace, all is well now.” The mantra will make it easier for you to focus on walking and quiet your mind from thoughts related to the rest of your life.

**FIND YOUR SENSES.** As you move, observe the sensory experience of the walk. Feel the ground against your feet, the texture of your clothes against your skin, and the breath flowing through your nostrils and notice the sounds, smells and sights around you, especially if you’re outside.

**FIND PATIENCE.** Don’t get frustrated if you have trouble staying focused. It’s not easy to do, but the benefits are many if you stick with meditative walking. Concentrate on your breathing and, as Archer recommends, “Let the walk walk you.”

– LINDA J. BROWN