

Steps to Mindful Walking

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~ *By Kirsten Antony, R.N., C.R.*

Whether we walk for exercise, to enjoy the great outdoors, or to get from point A to point B, there is a way to elevate walking to another level. This higher level is one where the senses are engaged, calm can be found and tension can be erased. It is called walking meditation or mindful walking and can be a great source in assisting us to learn to let go of our daily stresses.

Mindful walking can be a form of meditation. It can help the conscious mind become more aware of the subtleties of our breath, each step we take and our surroundings as we walk. Mindful walking can help with connecting to the present moment. If aches and pains are present in our daily lives, mindfulness can help us better connect with our bodies by learning how to shift our attention from pain to gratitude. The key is awareness.

The first step to mindful walking is to find silence, and preferably solitude. Find a quiet trail in nature to help eliminate distractions. Walking with a companion is fine if no major conversation is agreed upon. Silence is golden.

Secondly, become aware of your body. Is there tension in the shoulders? Is your posture stiff or relaxed? Become aware of your feet and feel the ground as you take your steps forward. Feel the weight of your body and each step you take. If there is tension somewhere in the body, take a deep breath. Start to become aware of your breathing as you inhale and exhale fully. Breathing exercises stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system which induces what is known as the Relaxation Response. Breathing exercises alone can be a wonderful health tool.

As you walk you may start to have distracting thoughts. Bring your awareness back to the breath and when any mental chatter pops up, just acknowledge it and just keep coming back to the breath and your steps. Now focus on your surroundings. If walking in nature, do you hear the birds chirping? Do you feel a cool breeze or the warmth of the sun shining on your back? Observing and becoming grateful for these simple blessings that surround us and often are overlooked can help us erase physical and mental pain.

One sacred place of mindful walking that has been used since prehistoric time is called a labyrinth. A labyrinth is a circular path with one entrance that also serves as the exit. In walking the labyrinth, some view the path as symbolic of our lives; walking to the center of the labyrinth can be seen as walking to the heart of a life's journey. It can be seen as walking to understand the human condition. It is a tool that can bring awareness and healing that can occur on a physical, mental or spiritual level. There are many labyrinths in the Metro-Denver area including St. Andrew's Methodist Church in Highlands Ranch, Children's Hospital of Colorado, and Unity Church of Denver.

If physical limitations prohibit you from walking, mindfulness in just sitting is possible. The same principles apply of being aware of the breath and your surroundings. Focus on the breathing exercises and finding gratitude in the simple things. This can bring much joy and healing to you in your life.



Kirsten Antony is a Registered Nurse and Certified Reflexologist. Kirsten is a holistic health care practitioner and specializes in foot and nail care. She provides care in Denver area facilities and also makes house calls. For more information visit: www.kirstenantony.com or call 303-668-8992.