

5 Reasons You Should Take a Hike

It isn't often that we associate the words "Go take a hike" with warm wishes for good health, spiritual growth and all-encompassing **contentment**. On the contrary, being spitefully told to take a **hike**, get lost, fly a kite or partake in any other sort of outdoorsy activity *alone* makes us feel rather unwanted, which is generally the speaker's intention.

But in this article, I want us to suspend the popular perception of this acerbic idiom and replace it with a sunnier interpretation. I want us to consider how something as simple and carefree as a half-hour trek through nature can reap tremendous benefits for body, mind and soul.

This positive spin on a negative phrase carries encouraging news, especially for those who sometimes shudder at the thought of a fast-paced kickboxing class at 6 a.m. after a sleepless night with a sick child, or who just can't seem to **motivate** themselves to hit the weights in a packed and noisy gym after a stressful day at the office. With just a little bit of time and a trusty pair of tennis shoes, we can literally walk our bad moods, bad habits and worries all away!

Today, I'm advising you—*lovingly*—to take a **hike**, and here are my top five reasons why:

1. You'll Be Less Stressed and Less Depressed

Spending time in nature has been linked to stress reduction. A number of studies have found that time spent outdoors relieves stress, improves focus and memory, and even promotes a sense of life satisfaction. Even on a crisp fall day, taking a walk outside can improve memory and attention span by up to 20 percent.

Well-conducted clinical trials have also shown vast mood improvements in adults with depression who exercise regularly. In some cases, in fact, exercise proves just as effective at elevating moods as **antidepressant** medication! There is also substantial evidence that walking with friends and family is even more advantageous than strolling solo because the social component builds stress resilience, lowers blood pressure and reduces levels of the stress hormone cortisol.

2. You'll Be More Energized

Did you just finish your third cup of coffee today and still feel like you need a nap? Try lacing up your tennis shoes and heading outside instead. Walking outdoors has been shown to recharge our batteries and elevate our moods, thanks to the wonderful feel-good **endorphins** it produces.

According to a 2008 study, individuals with sedentary lifestyles experienced a significant boost in energy (20 percent) and a 65 percent reduction in fatigue after walking. Dr. Tim Peutz, a co-author of this study, says, "Exercise traditionally has been associated with physical health, but we are quickly learning that exercise has a more **holistic effect** on the human body and includes effects on psychological health. What this means is that in every workout a single step is not just a step closer to a healthier body, *but also to a healthier mind*" (emphasis mine).

3. You'll Have Fewer Cravings

Nothing can thwart your **fitness** like mindless munching. A handful of candy here, a doughnut or two there—it all adds up. While it doesn't seem like much, a brisk walk could be all it takes to chase away those pesky cravings and silence the sweet treats calling out to you.

In a 2008 study, researchers recruited a group of "regular chocolate eaters"—people who ate at least two chocolate bars a day—and had them abstain for three days. The participants were

then divided into groups and assigned to work on difficult cognitive tests to raise their stress levels. They were also tempted with unwrapped chocolate bars. (How cruel!) The researchers found that if the subjects walked for 15 minutes on a treadmill at a pace that was quick but not tiring, they were far less likely to experience cravings and even exhibited lower blood pressure when handling the chocolate bars.

Short-duration walks have also been shown to reduce the urge to drink alcohol among heavy drinkers and cut tobacco cravings among smokers.

4. You'll Prevent Disease

It's true what Benjamin Franklin said: "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." **Walking** is a wonderful offensive weapon when it comes to warding off disease and illness. A daily half-hour walk can help prevent strokes, heart attacks, Alzheimer's and diabetes, according to the National Institutes of Health. To cut your risk of heart disease by 40 percent, the American Heart Association recommends you walk fairly briskly—3 to 4 miles per hour—and for 30 to 60 minutes at least five days a week.

A recent study found that **walking** every day for at least an hour might lower the risk of stroke by as much as one-third. Leader of the study, doctor and researcher Barbara Jefferis, says that "aiming for 150 minutes per week of moderate physical activity, which includes walking at a brisk pace or light gardening, or 75 minutes per week of vigorous activities, such as jogging or tennis ... would protect against heart disease and diabetes, as well as protecting against stroke."

5. You're Soul Will Be Refreshed

Walking is used countless times in the Bible to describe our relationship with God. We're told in Genesis 6:9 that Noah

“walked with God.” His great-grandfather Enoch walked so closely with God that he was spared physical death. Because of his faith and trust in the Lord, King David was able to fearlessly “walk through the valley of the shadow of death.”

Now, for those of you who may be thinking, *Well in those instances, walking is just a metaphor; it isn't literally what those guys were doing*, I want to point out one astonishing case in which walking with God was a very literal activity.

In Luke 24:13-35, we're told the story of two of Jesus' disciples who were walking the seven-mile journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus shortly after Jesus' crucifixion. As they walked and talked about what they perceived as a tragic event, the Lord showed up, His identity concealed, and began walking beside them. After chastising them for their doubts regarding the prophecies surrounding the Messiah's death and resurrection, He patiently explained to them “what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself,” beginning with Moses and the Old Testament prophets.

When they finally reached their destination with full hearts and empty bellies, the pair insisted upon this captivating stranger's company at supper. Jesus, always willing to dine with us, took bread, gave thanks and broke it (proving that the Last Supper wasn't really the last after all!). He then opened their eyes so they could recognize who He truly was—no stranger at all, but their Master and Savior resurrected, just as He'd promised. And then as quickly and unexpectedly as He'd appeared, He vanished from their sight.

The story goes on to tell us that the disciples swiftly returned to Jerusalem to declare to the others gathered there: “It is true! The Lord has risen.” It took just one **walk**, just one conversation with the Lord, for their pity party to be transformed into the first Easter celebration.

Can you think of a better reason to walk than having the Lord

appear and tell you all about Himself? Can you think of a greater benefit of walking than having all of your worries, doubts and insecurities extinguished by the One who died so we might shine bright as lights of the world living abundantly and victoriously, without fear?

When you go for a **walk** through God's creation, either alone or with a companion, I urge you to make it an Emmaus walk of your own. Invite the Lord to spend that half-hour with you, just as the original Emmaus walkers welcomed Jesus into their home for dinner. Ask Him questions. Tell Him what troubles you. And then listen in awe as He reminds you of His everlasting promises and refreshes you with the supernatural water of His unfailing Word. The numerous health benefits and endorphin rush you'll receive after you return home will be nothing compared to the surge of joy within your soul.

"You shall walk in all the ways which the Lord your God has commanded you, that you may live and that it may be well with you" (Deut. 5:33).

Fit Fact: *Jesus walked a total of 3,125 miles during his 3-year public ministry.*

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