

How to Walk Your Way to Creativity

We've all experienced it: the flood of "feel good" brain chemicals that accompanies an intense workout and the elevation of our mood that lingers long after we leave the gym. Very rarely do we finish up a run, a sports game or any other kind of high-intensity exercise and think, *Well, now I really feel lousy! Better not do that anymore!*

God made our bodies to move and to run and to jump and to lift. When we do, we reap a host of benefits, including reduced stress levels, decreased risk of disease, healthier hearts and stronger bones, to name a few. But another exercise advantage has nothing to do with the way we look or feel, but the way we think, and more specifically, how well we think *creatively*.

A recent Stanford University study found that taking a brief stroll can significantly increase creativity. For millennia, artistic types—poets, painters, musicians and actors—have claimed that some of their best ideas are developed during the course of a relaxing walk. But so far, there has been no scientific evidence to back this up.

"Me thinks that the moment my legs begin to move, my thoughts begin to flow." —Henry David Thoreau

"I would walk along the *quais* when I had finished work or when I was trying to think something out. It was easier to think if I was walking and doing something or seeing people doing something that they understood." —Ernest Hemingway

Doctor Marily Oppezzo, at the time a Stanford graduate student, recruited a group of undergraduate students and made it her mission to spark their creativity within the confines of a drab, dim, uninspiring room that featured only a desk and

a treadmill. She asked the students to complete tests of creativity, which might involve tasks such as coming up with unusual uses for a button. Then the participants walked on the treadmill at a comfortable pace of their choosing. As they walked—facing a blank wall, I might add—the students repeated the creativity tests, which took about eight minutes.

The creativity of nearly every student increased significantly when they walked. Dr. Oppezzo reported that most were able to generate about 60 percent more uses for an object, and noted that their ideas were both “novel and appropriate.”

Challenged to see in what other contexts creativity could be unleashed, Dr. Oppezzo moved portions of the experiment outside. You’d assume the great outdoors would produce even greater results, wouldn’t you? But surprisingly, this study showed that students became just as creative by walking inside the dreary classroom as when they were outside strolling through the verdant university campus.

Dr. Oppezzo remarked that “it really seems that it’s the walking that matters,” in terms of spurring creativity. A pretty setting is just the cherry on top.

How a casual walk can alter our various mental processes is still unclear, but Dr. Oppezzo hypothesizes that the improved mood gained by walking may cause creativity to bloom more easily. Another possibility is that walking may divert energy that would otherwise be spent stifling creative thought. (Perhaps stifled by watching TV or remaining glued to a smartphone?)

This research may not reveal anything shocking or revolutionary, but it does give scientific credence to the power of walking that many innovative and imaginative people have lauded for ages.

The fact is, all of us get stuck in mental mire. We all have watched our trains of thought go screeching off the rails, and

we've all felt a thick, nearly palpable fog settle over our minds. It's encouraging to know that the next time your brain encounters a barrier, all it may take to break through it is an easygoing walk to clear your head.

"For all the peoples walk each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God forever and ever" (Mic. 4:5, ESV).

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