

Walk to Wellness or “The more active you are, the more alive you’ll feel.”

Movement, and in particular, the act of walking, seems to be a key component in who and what we are as humans.

Almost from birth, driven by a powerful internal desire or force, babies continually strive to stand and walk. They delight, even in early months, in grasping big-people hands, wobbling their weight on chubby little legs. Even before freedom of movement is attained through crawling, they work on heaving themselves upright. The first solo steps are one of the biggest moments in a little life, a major milestone, one that everyone involved cheers.



We are meant to move, to walk. We are an active species, and our health and well-being are tied up in movement. In an article called *The Spirituality of Wellness*, Louisa Rogers asserts that “Movement is life. Your body wants to move.” Although sometimes it may be difficult to hear the body expressing its desire to get up and move, really, anyone who has the habit of regularly engaging in physical activity knows that it *is* true, and also knows what the research is now thundering repeatedly: physical activity is not only good for us physically, it is imperative on many levels.

Of course, it is of utmost importance to our physical health (we’ve been hearing this for a long time, and maybe even feeling a little nagged about it) but it also has a huge impact on one’s mood, outlook and sense of well-being (also known as mental health), and amazingly also has surprising effects on brain function (basically, exercise makes you smarter!).

“Exercise is magic.” This was a summary statement by Alice Burron, exercise physiologist and trainer, in a presentation on achieving resilience through physical activity. She explained that there are significant healing and health-boosting chemical, cell-level changes that begin occurring almost immediately when a person starts physical activity, which start processes that decrease overall risks for the things that kill us—heart disease, diabetes, etc. And it honestly does rather seem like magic.

Depression and anxiety are significant health challenges for a lot of people. Walking has been shown to improve mood and sleep, reduce stress and ease anxiety. Earlier this year NPR reported that in a summary of research studies, there was a “striking” finding emerging that exercise seemed as effective as antidepressant drugs and psychological treatments.

There are a lot of recent and amazing studies showing links between body fitness and improved brain function and resilience, as well. One article called exercise “brain food.” Memory is one of the brain functions that is very responsive to exercise, with the memory-wiring part of the brain actually growing with cardiovascular fitness. Many studies of school children in several different countries show improved learning in their subjects with intermittent moderate exercise during learning activities. In addition to boosting memory, physical activity also helps with focus and concentration, as shown in a large US study looking at the effects of after-school sports classes. The kids were obviously more physically fit, but surprisingly they also saw improvements in their ability to ignore distraction, multitask and hold onto and manipulate information. There’s a good argument for recess!

Exercise can be daunting, though. How does one start? Which exercise is best? Burrton has a great take on the whole exercise thing and how intimidating it can be: engage in exercise from the viewpoint of balance, healing and resiliency. Move in ways that help you heal and feel good, that help you achieve balance in your life and in your body, and address the issues and stresses you might have. Get away from the pressure to do more, to do it faster and harder. And get away from guilt.

So with that said, and with the guidance, “start low and go slow,” walking is a great way, the perfect way, to get moving. “Walking requires no gym membership, no Lycra, and no technical skill, yet it is profoundly therapeutic. ‘If there was a pill that could [do what] walking does, people would be clamoring for it’ says Dr. JoAnn Manson, Professor of Medicine at Harvard University” (Rogers, *The Spirituality of Wellness*.)

Moving, walking, is what we do as humans, it is life. “The more active you are, the more alive you’ll feel.”

So, strap on some shoes (or snowboots!), get out there and put one foot in from of the other—like we’ve been doing just about since birth.

At Public Health we have a Wellness Program to help and support people seeking to find healthier ways of being. Any questions about this column or questions about health, call or come by and see us! (789-9203)