

## **Walking: Steps Towards Creativity and Longevity**

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This is my last website article until September. Several comments before I launch into this month's topic. As I have expressed each year in my June article, I am very appreciative of the feedback, questions, and insights received from my readers. My primary goal in writing these articles has been to convey information and ideas that might serve as a catalyst for self-reflection and self-change.

I would like to share a brief history about these monthly articles. As I sat down to write this column I realized that it has been more than 15 years since my initial website piece appeared. The statement "time certainly flies by" seems very apt. In 1999 when I began to write these columns I gave little, if any, thought for how long I would be doing so. At that time I was fortunate that I was involved with many other exciting but time-consuming writing opportunities, including books and book chapters.

Yet, even with these other commitments I was drawn to sharing my thoughts on the web, which in 1999 was still a relatively new vehicle for communication. Based on my discussions with other mental health professionals I was one of the few psychologists to have a website at that time. I must admit that the main reason I had a site was because two years earlier my son Rich had the foresight to found his own website development and marketing company that focused on a clientele of small businesses and professionals. His company, *flyte new media*, has grown steadily and expanded into many other domains, including social media. Rich advised me to have a website; had he not been my son I would have wondered, "Why does a psychologist need a website?" and held off on having such a site built. Of course, in today's world people are surprised when a professional does not have at least a small website.

Rich wisely observed that if I were to have a website, it should not remain dormant but rather provide new content on a regular basis. One way to do so was to offer a monthly article or newsletter. Even with Rich's encouragement I harbored many doubts as I wrote my first article, wondering who other than my wife Marilyn (and perhaps Rich) would read what I had to say. I knew Marilyn would read each article since she had graciously consented to review and edit all of my columns prior to their

being sent out and posted. I hoped that my subscriber list would increase steadily, which I am pleased to report it has. Interestingly, during the first couple of years in 1999 and 2000 I received a number of e-mails asking how much it would cost to sign up to receive these articles even though there was nothing on my site suggesting I was charging a fee for them. The thought of the web providing “free” access to a wide range of information was not yet a part of everyone’s psyche.

With 10,000 current subscribers and many others who visit my site each month to access my articles and from the feedback I continue to receive, I’m very pleased that I followed Rich’s advice in 1999 to write these monthly pieces. I have found them a wonderful means to connect with people around the world.

And now to my 156<sup>th</sup> website article about a subject that holds much significance for a healthier lifestyle.

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If someone approached you and said, “I have a recommendation that will require only 10 minutes of your time each day, it poses no risk and will increase your creativity and your overall health,” what would you guess was involved in the 10 minutes?

Or, if you were between 70-89 years of age and someone suggested you set aside approximately three hours each week for a couple of activities that would significantly decrease the likelihood of physical disability, what do you think you would have to do to realize this benefit?

And, very importantly, once you had this knowledge, how likely would you be to put it into action?

### **The Benefits of Walking**

What is the main activity that transpires during the 10 minutes and most of the three hours: *walking*. Yes, simply walking.

I have written a number of pieces about lifestyle choices that are within our control to assume that would improve the quality of our lives as well as our longevity (e.g., please see my November and December, 2011 columns). Recently, I read several articles that supported this view and prompted my writing this column.

May Wong in the *Stanford Report* detailed research conducted by Marilyn Oppezzo, a Stanford doctoral graduate in educational psychology, and Daniel Schwartz, a

professor at Stanford Graduate School of Education. Their findings were noteworthy: “Creative thinking improves while a person is walking and shortly thereafter. . . . The study found that walking indoors or outdoors similarly boosted creative inspiration. The act of walking itself, and not the environment, was the main factor. Across the board, creativity levels were consistently and significantly higher for those walking compared to those sitting.” This was true if walking were only for 10 minutes per day.

The researchers expected that walking outdoors as compared with using a treadmill indoors would lead to more creative thinking, but this was not the case. “A person walking indoors—on a treadmill in a room facing a blank wall—or walking outdoors in the fresh air produced twice as many creative responses compared to a person sitting down. The study also found that creative juices continued to flow even when a person sat back down shortly after a walk.”

### **Exercise for the Elderly**

An article titled “To Age Well, Walk,” written by Gretchen Reynolds in *The New York Times*, paralleled the results of the Stanford study with a focus on an older population. Reynolds began with the pronouncement, “Regular exercise, including walking, significantly reduces the chance that a frail older person will become physically disabled, according to one of the largest and longest-running studies of its kind to date.” The results, which were published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*, reinforced the “necessity of frequent physical activity for our aging parents, grandparents, and, of course, ourselves.”

The lead author of the study, Dr. Marco Pahor, director of the Institute on Aging at the University of Florida in Gainesville, asserted, “For the first time, we have directly shown that exercise can effectively lessen or prevent the development of physical disability in a population of elderly people.”

The experimental design involved the recruitment of 1,635 men and women ages 70-89 who were assessed to be sedentary but demonstrated the ability to walk without assistance for a quarter-mile, which was the cut-off point established by the researchers for not being physically disabled. Next the men and women were assigned randomly to either an exercise or education group.

Reynolds writes, “The exercise group received information about aging but also started an exercise program of walking and light, lower-body weight training with ankle weights, going to the research center twice a week for supervised group walks on a track, with the walks growing progressively longer. They were asked to complete three or four more exercise sessions at home, aiming for a total of 150 minutes of walking and about three 10-minute sessions of weight-training exercises each week.”

In contrast, those in the education group visited the research center once a month and were informed about nutrition, health care, and other themes related to the aging process.

The research was conducted for 2 ½ years, much longer than most exercise studies. At the end of this time period, those in the exercise group were “about 18 percent less likely to have experienced any episode of physical disability during the experiment. They were also about 28 percent less likely to have become persistently, possibly permanently, disabled, defined as being unable to walk the quarter of mile by themselves.”

Interestingly, the differences between the two groups may have been even more dramatic, except that a number of members of the so-called control (education) group began to exercise even though they were not requested to do so. Apparently, for these elderly just participating in the education group motivated them to adopt healthier fitness habits.

Mildred Johnson, a retired 82-year-old office worker summed up her experience. “Exercising has changed my whole aspect of what aging means. It’s not about how much help you need from other people now. It’s more about what I can do for myself. Besides, gossiping during group walks really keeps you engaged in life.” Ms. Johnson’s comments capture the importance of adopting what I have called an attitude of “personal control,” an essential outlook for leading a more resilient, motivated lifestyle. Also, I loved Ms. Johnson’s comment about gossiping.

### **The Views of an Expert on Exercise**

Dr. John Ratey, a friend, renowned psychiatrist and author, and a member of the faculty of Harvard Medical School, was not surprised by these results about walking and exercise. Among John’s many impressive books is *Spark: The Revolutionary New*

*Science of Exercise and the Brain*, which I featured in my September, 2008 article. I should note that last week I received a copy of John's new book co-authored with Richard Manning titled *Go Wild*, and have just begun to read what is proving to be another informative, fascinating work.

In an interview conducted with John by Jeremy Hobson on WBUR, a public radio station in Boston, John referred to the Stanford study, asserting, "When we're walking we are stimulating the brain in many, many ways. . . . We're not only adding brain cells, but we're making the brain cells that we have that much better. Exercise is a prime mover of the brain, helping it to deal with emotional ups and downs as well as anxiety, tension, stress, and help the brain function better. The more we exercise, the better our brain gets, the more focused we can be, and the smarter we are. All those are facts, not just idle speculation."

In discussing interventions with patients, John emphasized during the WBUR interview as he has in his past writings that exercise can be more effective than medication in dealing with certain mood or attentional issues. "It increases our neurotransmitters like serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine, just as our psychiatric drugs do, as well as having a whole host of other effects that drugs can't do."

In keeping with his viewpoint that exercise promotes focus, creativity, and better health, John was interviewed by Jeremy Hobson while the two took a stroll next to the Charles River in Boston.

### **A Lack of Exercise**

Sadly, many Americans as well as residents of other countries rarely exercise or engage in any kind of physical activity. I know individuals who drive to work in the morning, take an elevator up to their office, sit at their desk most of the day, drive home at night, eat dinner, and then either watch TV or sit at their computer. That portrait certainly captures a sedentary lifestyle. People have said to me that they wish they could find the time to exercise, but for a variety of reasons they can't. Others have said they are just too tired to exercise. Of course, not moving one's body is likely to increase a sense of lethargy and a feeling of being tired.

It is obvious that there are obstacles to implementing an exercise program. One factor that I have witnessed is a distorted perception of what such a program entails. As

noted above, some individuals contend that they have neither the time nor energy for exercise. They view exercise as a Herculean task that only a few can meet. Yet, as the studies reported above indicate, exercise need not be a superhuman challenge but rather an activity as simple as walking 10 minutes each day.

I have advocated what I believe to be a sensible position, namely, that when we undertake lifestyle changes, especially pertaining to diet or exercise regimens, we should do so guided by realistic goals. Too often, as we attempt to modify our behaviors, we focus our attention on quickly achieving long-term goals at the expense of appreciating short-term gains. When these long-term goals are not attained in a speedy fashion, disappointment is likely to set in accompanied by the abandonment of the program.

I recognize that initiating and maintaining what psychologist Dr. Roger Walsh refers to as therapeutic lifestyle changes or TLCs (please see my November, 2011 column) can appear daunting. However, a practical plan of action rooted in realistic short-term and long-term goals, and a consideration of the obstacles to be encountered together with strategies to deal with these obstacles, can all serve as a foundation for success.

As a first step, consider walking 10 minutes each day and attempting other small changes such as walking up one flight of steps rather than taking the elevator the entire way. In many cases the 10 minutes may lead to 15 to 20 minutes over a couple of months and accomplishment in this activity may lead to engaging in other exercises. Also, many people are more likely to follow through on a program when accompanied by a friend or a small group.

Most important, discover what works best for you in achieving TLCs. There is not one right way. As we have seen, the benefits of such a discovery are noteworthy and may be life-saving.

I hope the next couple of months prove very satisfying and re-energizing and during that time you are able to assume a healthier lifestyle that enriches your physical and emotional well-being.

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