Let's Take a Walk

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Boost well-being and build friendships by walking and talking.

Posted Apr 27, 2018

It is a rainy dreary day in spring. I am unable to take my usual three-mile walk with one of my friends. As I gaze out the window I am reflecting on the relationships that I have built over the years through walking and talking. Most of my very close friendships have been shaped by long walks. During these times stressors are discussed, advise is sought or given, books, films, restaurants are discussed. There is no question that social connections are one key to maintaining health and happiness. Satisfying relationship provide emotional warmth, companionship, and nurturance. Relationships also help minimize stress and anxiety and help people cope with the difficulties of chronic illness. In our fast-paced society it is often difficult to find time to connect with others, as a result loneliness and social isolation are on the increase, especially in later life. Increasingly as I walk in the woods near my house I find that others who are also out walking are, at the same time, are on
their tech devices, conducting meetings, checking email, and so forth, in short missing out on many of the benefits of walking. Walking is a great way to exercise, get fresh air, connect with nature, and connect and fight loneliness and isolation especially for men and women who are older and retired. Although everyone feels lonely and isolated some of the time, studies have found that loneliness is on the increase, more than 40% of adults over 65 have reported experiencing regular feelings of loneliness. Loneliness threatens well-being and contributes to increased rates of morbidity and mortality.

I have researched the various effects of loneliness for many years. While there are those who are more at risk for feeling lonely, immigrants - especially older immigrants, those struggling with health concerns, people living in dangerous neighborhoods or neighborhoods with no sidewalks, parks, or walking trails, loneliness appears to be on the increase among older adults of all backgrounds and social circumstances. Research has shown that loneliness is been linked to a decline in well-being, it is associated with an increase in depression, anxiety, dementia, an increase in physical health concerns and chronic illness, and even mortality. While simply taking a walk cannot combat all the problems associated with loneliness it is a step in helping people connect and feel better. Most communities have walking clubs that meet at regular times and places. They are open to people of all ages and can be helpful in getting people out walking and talking. Walking with a neighbor or friend is one way of promoting well-being and building acquaintances, maybe even building new friendships. In later life people may have more time for friendships, old friends may have moved away or passed away. New friendships, especially those that are activity based, can help boost life satisfaction and happiness. In fact, studies have found that older adults define friendship in terms of the concrete behaviors involved such as self-disclosure, sociability, day-to-day assistance, and shared activities such as walking. What better way to connect than taking a walk, especially in nature.

Long walks have served as the social lubricants of my life. They have also motivated me to keep walking. Three-mile walks 4 to 5 times a week not only help build and maintain my relationships, they also help me cope with stress and feel happier. Considerable research has been conducted on the benefits of regular walking. The March 2018 AARP Bulletin highlights some of this work. Walking can lower high blood pressure, help strengthen muscles that support joints and maintain weight, preventing or helping those with arthritis cope with this painful illness. Regular walking can also combat Type 2 diabetes, an illness that has reached epidemic proportions. It is estimated that
10% of the world’s population is expected to develop diabetes in the next two decades. Twenty five percent of those over 65 have Type 2 diabetes and an even greater percentage are pre-diabetic. While walking is not a cure all, it seems that it is a crucial step in helping cope with illness management. As mentioned above walking also helps promote regular sleep and helps reduce the incidence of depression, the number one mental health disorder worldwide. Walking and talking can help promote important meaningful social connectivity it also helps promote a sense of accomplishment, and a plan for the day.

Of all the possible ways to exercise walking is the easiest and has the added benefits of socializing. Walking also does not require significant financial investment, no memberships or expensive equipment required. It does not place undue stress and strain on the body, and it is an activity that can be engaged in in most places, the city, the suburbs, and the country. According to researchers, social integration and physical activity are two of the most important factors inter-related factors determining health and well-being in later adulthood. Walking is an activity that promotes both. Older adults who can stay physically active also experience have higher life satisfaction. Walking not only effects the physical self, helping with weight management, it also leads to psychological benefits such as an increase in self-esteem and feelings of control. Given the strength of the relationships between exercise and well-being, it is surprising that the majority of older American’s do not participate in regular exercise, even walking. Studies show that only about 25% of those of over the age of 65 exercise regularly. The minimum requirements for gaining benefits from exercise is only 30 minutes a day.

Source: Jasmin Tahmaseb McConatha
Walking is a great way to take advantage of the multiple benefits of physical activity. While it is possible to walk almost anywhere, there are factors that influence any activity even walking. These include location, neighborhood, community, even state of residence. For example, the healthiest states in the U.S. tend to be in New England — Vermont, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut, although Hawaii are the healthiest. The unhealthiest, by contrast, are in the South — Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama. As a longtime resident of Alabama, I found the climate conducive to walking, however according to researchers, these states tend to have less healthy lifestyles, poorer air quality, higher levels of smoking and drinking, and lower levels of physical activity. Clearly community is a key factor influencing health. Men and women from a lower socioeconomic background tend to be less active. There are a number of reasons for this including potentially unsafe neighborhood, access to fewer parks, a lack of resources such as membership to health clubs and other facilities. These factors may combine with a work background connected to exhausting physical labor. Physical activity is also gendered, men also appear to engage in more exercise activities than women although when it comes to walking and talking it is more often women who engage in this activity, men are likely to engage in formal exercise and sport. While there are many factors to consider when promoting walking, it is safe to say if possible get out and take a walk. Even better reach out to a neighbor and ask them to join you. You might be helping them manage a physical illness such as type 2 diabetes or combat anxiety and depression. Summer is just around the corner: Reach out and mentor a neighbor. Ask them to take a walk. It's a simple gesture that can make a big difference to their well-being.