

Walking as a Practice Walking for Health, Connection, Community or a Cause



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Walking as a Practice Defined

Walking as a Practice begins with choosing to walk for reasons other than transportation. When we individually or collectively choose to walk, we are doing more for ourselves, for each other, and for our communities than we could ever imagine.

The idea of Walking as a Practice is a response to several questions:

- What can walking do for my physical and social health?
- What can walking do for my peer relationships, neighborhood, and community?
- What can walking do for my personal and spiritual journey?
- What can walking do to advance social justice?



This report outlines four categories that identify how individuals and organizations across the United States of America are engaging in the practice of walking:

- Personal Health and Connection
- Motivational Campaigns and Workplace Wellness
- Inward and Outward Journey
- Causes and Social Justice

After introductory descriptions, these four categories are illustrated with case studies of eleven local, regional, and national walking organizations. Each organization, in its own unique way, provides opportunities in one or more of these four areas, for people to engage in the practice of walking. We hope this material will offer ideas, encouragement, and inspiration for more people to participate in walking as a practice.

In this report, the term “walking” includes rambling, sauntering, easy/moderate hiking, and moving at a 1-3 miles per hour pace in a wheelchair.

A Typology of Walking as a Practice

1. Personal Health and Connection: Walking Clubs, Groups, and Programs

Imagine the sight of trees as you pass them by. Can you feel the breeze along your arms, legs, and forehead? Maybe your arms are swinging beside you. Your eyes glance to the left and to the right scanning your environment and clearing the dust that might have found its way inside.

Most of us are familiar with many of the benefits of walking. We think first of the physical benefits - improving balance, strengthening bones, reducing risk of heart disease and stroke, preventing type II diabetes, and so much more. How often do we consider the mental health benefits of walking? Did you know that walking boosts brain power, drives creativity, helps control addiction, improves self-confidence, and reduces stress (Breene, 2013)?

And how about the emotional benefits? “Walking helps make space, clear the air, and moderate our worst moods - allowing us to breathe again,” says former endurance athlete and health motivator, Mark Sisson (Sisson, 2014). Walking provides many spiritual benefits, as well, as we engage with the unknown, experience chance encounters with the likes of a yellow finch landing on a bench nearby, take steps of silence in prayer or thought, protect an hour for a walk through a labyrinth or garden, and invest in the presence of things we cannot comprehend.



For many of us, our bodies are engineered to move this way and it’s becoming all too clear that a sedentary lifestyle is a disease in and of itself. Moving matters, and walking can be the absolute best low-barrier invitation into living a more active, healthy, and connected life.

Connected? How so?

Let’s go back to the arms swinging and the trees going by.

Neighbors sit out on their front porches and wave as you exchange eye contact. There is a young girl riding her scooter and she falls. You help her up and continue on your way. You stop to read a flyer about a community meeting on neighborhood safety or clean water. You jot down the phone number and plan to call the organizer tomorrow. You turn the corner and notice a gaping crack in the sidewalk - you were thinking about inviting your mother out for a walk, but conditions like these would be hazardous for her. You take a picture of the damaged sidewalk so you can report it to the city in the morning. On the way back, the café on the corner is about to close and the owner asks if you want a box of “end of the day” pastries for half off. You buy them and carry them home for your family.

Walking is a built-in tool for connecting with others, with our surroundings, and with ourselves. Whether on foot or on wheels, we see, hear, and listen in slower and more mindful ways when we move at 1-3 miles per hour. In a culture that seems to be moving faster every day, emphasizing social media-driven relationships over face-to-face encounters, and developing endless car-centered sprawl, we are facing extreme levels of stress and isolation, and a lack of human connection.

Walking in community alone and with each other is an inherent all-in-one solution to help us address and better understand the challenges and opportunities ahead.

Related Case Studies

- [American Volkssport Association](#)
- [GirlTrek](#)
- [Keep Moving Walking Clubs \(Massachusetts Council on Aging\)](#)
- [Meetup](#)
- [Partnership for the National Trails System and Continental Divide Trail Coalition](#)
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Mall Walking

Mall walking is a popular strategy for overcoming some of the barriers to walking in the United States.

A report compiled by several regional and national partners, *Mall Walking: A Program Resource Guide*, lists seven barriers to walking that mall walking programs address (Belza B, 2015):

- Weather
- Neighborhood safety
- Fear of injury
- Lack of resources
- Lack of social support
- Lack of experience or skills when exercising
- Lack of available and clean restrooms

Mall walking is inclusive to all levels, ages, and abilities. Many programs start before the mall is open to shoppers so there is easy movement through the walkways. Others offer incentives such as store discounts for participation and goal achievement. And mall walking can be a non-competitive, sociable activity in a space where participants are not judged on their physique, speed, or attire (Belza B, 2015).

Factors to consider when planning and sustaining a mall walking program include mall management support, personnel needed, transportation, program ideas, diversity and culture, safety, costs and economic differences, evaluation and more. Mall walking develops walking as a practice all year long and continues to be one of the best ways to engage older adults, families, and participants who need safe, flat, and accessible walking environments.



Christina Dill, Walking Movement Leader with Walk2Conect, on her weekly evening "Mall Walk"

2. Motivational Campaigns and Workplace Wellness: Campaigns, Challenges, Contests and Apps

Messaging

Creating compelling messages, telling inspiring stories, inviting people to engage in walking through technology, and investing in organizational culture around walking and active living are all ways to open new avenues to walking as a practice.

Many local, statewide, and national organizations, community groups, health agencies, and corporate wellness programs have adopted walking-focused campaigns to help their constituents keep moving and stay healthy. From marketing materials naming the benefits of walking to powerful stories of how lives have been transformed by taking the first step, these efforts can inspire new behaviors and insights that banish sedentary lifestyle patterns.

National campaigns like The Every Body Walk Collaborative (EBW! Collaborative) use media power through videos, interviews, and targeted outreach to highlight walking and walkable community design. In 2013, the EBW! Collaborative developed a 30 minute documentary called The Walking Revolution - a collection of interviews and stories demonstrating how a regular walking routine can foster tremendous changes in your life and in your community (Every Body Walk Collaborative, 2013).

The American Heart Association has an extensive program allowing organizations and companies to apply for various levels of recognition for their specific wellness programs (American Heart Association, 2015). Their Platinum level awards are only granted when data on behavior change or return on investment is collected, analyzed, and documented. With focus and creativity, all varieties of workplaces and active living groups can build pathways for more walking as a practice in their communities.

And there is no shortage of locally developed walking kits, like Get Healthy Washoe's Walking Program Toolkit for the Workplace (Washoe, Last Updated 2011). The kit provides step by step instructions for starting a walking program, logging daily achievements, and managing program evaluation.

So, what about the apps?

With growing capacities in technology, data tracking and goal achievement management, instant gratification and social camaraderie through a smartphone app. creates new opportunities to support walking as a practice.

With expanding access to the Internet and cell phones being replaced by smartphones, the "exercise app." market has been soaring. Fitbit sold nearly 11 million devices last year, generating \$745.5 million in revenue, and the MapMyWalk app recorded over 30 million total users in November of 2014 (Lee, 2015). Contests and online tools only get more enticing, energizing, and appealing for users who are drawn to such tools.

These apps are clean and generally easy to use. They track just about everything and they connect you to family and friends to chat, swap stats, and to even compete for badges and prizes. GPS tracking features have created an immediate satisfaction algorithm to boost more walking practice. Many of today's apps and tech. tools are finding their way directly into worksite wellness programs, which are increasingly being linked to the employer's health care insurance costs and benefits.



Related Case Studies

- Every Body Walk! Collaborative
- Healthy Shasta

While some worksite wellness programs are framed in the form of a 30-day contest for the most steps taken rather than behavior change over time, others are crafting messages and encouraging a practice of walking as a way of life. According to Laura Putnam, author of *Workplace Wellness That Works*, “Wellness programs shouldn’t be something separate, they need to be integrated into the culture of the organization” (Putnam, 2015). Laura adds “Consider adopting a regular practice of walking meetings, develop a team of leaders to energize and engage colleagues, include walking or wellness programs as a part of initial training for new employees, and be extra mindful to make supervisors aware for how they encourage or discourage program involvement” (Putnam, 2015).

Walking Apps in Practice: Map My Walk

Between July, 2014 and July, 2015, Map My Walk tracked:

- More than 145,000 walkers per day
- Total distance walked = 151 million miles
- Average distance walked = 2.5 miles
- Average time per walk = 53 minutes



Apps like Map My Walk, which is a program of Map My Fitness are game changers in the way they impact walking as a practice. “Users are very goal-oriented and extremely active on all social aspects of the platform. They can connect with friends from Facebook, family, and people from all over the world,” said Sarah King, Account Executive of Connected Fitness at Under Armour (King, 2015).

Users who sign up for the paid version can take advantage of features that allow them to document, track, and share walking routes as well as identify new routes that fit their style. Map My Walk allows users to cross over data from programs like Fitbit and hundreds of others to count toward progress and goal setting, and “30 day challenge” campaigns can be easily organized.

3. Inward and Outward Journey: Rambling, Pilgrimage and Thru-Hiking

Remember

Do you remember the river path, the mountain trail, the rural road, or the quiet tunnel? Was it in the past or will it be in your future? It's unclear.

You may only carry a backpack with water, food, rain wear, and a temporary shelter. You may have choices to make about how long you want to follow the path ahead. There might be family or job obligations that keep you from going too much farther, or maybe from ever taking the first steps on this journey.

Let's imagine you decide to go. You're not sure what exactly happens at the end of the day, what's in store for tomorrow, and what's on the other side of the next 3 months. All you know, or all you think you know, is that trusting the unknown for today and for the weeks and months ahead might bring you the clarity, peace, healing, and connection you've been longing for.



Thousands of years of ritual

Rooted in thousands of years of ritual, tradition, expedition, and simple human wanderlust, the long journey onfoot, the pilgrimage, or the wayfarer's quest is the way millions have adopted and continue to adopt walking as a practice. The person who decides to walk for days, weeks, months, or years - along the way - opens doors to the long journey within. Motivated by deeply held beliefs, longing to let go and forge new pathways of strength, or seeking someform of healing, many of these solo or group travelers share a desire for an experience where the pace is one step at a time.

Not long ago, we all traveled this way, and much of the world still does.

In the United States, even more than in other developed countries, we build environments that hold our homes, workplaces, and social centers in the fabric of car-centered transportation corridors. For many, training and preparing one's body and mind for long walks can be difficult in the context of daily life. But escaping to distant parks, greenways, and trails has become a common avenue for cultivating this form of walking practice.

When we walk for so long that we lose consciousness of the act of walking, we allow the journey within to take its course. Quick thoughts become longer stories, and stored stress is slowly transformed into a calm and cleansing balm of acceptance, possibility, and hope.

But cultivating the inward and outward journey does not always require long pilgrimage. The spontaneity found in an evening stroll can joyfully guide one's steps - practices like these help make the human experience creative, light, connected, and whole.

4. Causes and Social Justice: Empowerment, Marches, Races and Fundraisers

Coming together

We come together in a circle of diverse backgrounds, ethnicities, hopes, dreams, and shared pain.

Many of us left work early to make it to the park. Some of us were at the park all day to set things up. Some folks live on the next block and others have come from far neighborhoods. We are gathering in peace to be with one another and to walk together in solidarity for an end to the violence that has taken the lives of too many people in our community.

We don't need to say much. The peace march organizers introduce the families who have been impacted the most. Tears, fragility, and vulnerability are all they have left but there is resilience in them to keep standing for peace and against what took their loved ones - we see them and they see us. Soon, we begin walking together, occasionally shouting "Peace, peace, peace" as we turn corners and collect curious neighbors who are compelled to join.

Walking together unites us.

Collective expression

Walking has long served as a model or vehicle for collective expression when people seek change and when a sense of mission moves people to march together. Sometimes anger and resentment, sometimes grief and letting go, sometimes joy and celebration provide the motivation, and sometimes a community of neighbors walk together to take their streets back and elevate their voices.

Related Case Studies

- American Pilgrims on the Camino
- Partnership for the National Trails System and Continental Divide Trail Coalition
- Walk2Connect



The charitable, historical, and cultural journey of our country has many ties to moving and marching together. There are thousands of examples of group walks and marches for civil rights, human rights, environmental rights, peace and political conflict, holidays and tributes, honoring heroes and loved ones, and so much more. Walking together in solidarity, in support of, in remembrance of, in protest of a variety of issues has long been an important way for people in the United States to organize and act collectively.

Walking has also become an important part of the organized 5k, 10k, and marathon fundraising and awareness model. Thousands of organized races inspire millions of participants every year who come together to champion, promote, fundraise, and build awareness for a variety of local, regional, national, and international causes. You've seen them, you've heard of them, and more than likely you've participated in them at some point in your life.

Tracking times, closing streets, and providing temporary pedestrian amenities for the thousands that find their way to the starting line is just the beginning. Our culture of racing and fundraising provides another way of understanding walking as a practice.

Related Case Studies

- GirlTrek
- Susan G. Komen

Walking together can foster great things when we move towards a goal, a good cause, or the change we desperately want to see. This realm of walking as a practice is not only impacting individual lives, but its tangibly making the world a stronger, unified, and more peaceful place.

Conclusion

Whether walking is your main form of transportation or a leisure activity, there are many ways to start engaging with walking as a practice.

In this report and in the accompanied case studies we have connected you with a menu of themes, organizations, ideas, and entry points into how others are getting started. More than anything, it starts with trusting yourself, being safe, inviting others to join you, and taking one step (or roll) at a time. Walking is intrinsic to our design.

Once you start, you will find that your body, your mind, your heart, and your spirit will quickly convince you just how important and therapeutic it is to move this way. We hope you join us in co-creating more walkable communities that foster comfortable, enjoyable, accessible and safe walking experiences for all."

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