



FLORIDA BAR NEWS

MINDFUL WALKING: TRANSFORM EVERYDAY MOMENTS OF WALKING INTO A BENEFICIAL MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

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The New Year is offering many of us cool mornings, blue skies, and a bright sun that beckon us outdoors to take a walk. In previous columns we have explored the **four primary mindfulness practices** of focused attention, body scan, open monitoring, and connection that tend to be done sitting down. This month we consider the important practice of mindful walking and connect it to each of these four practices

so that you might bring your mindfulness practice with you the next time you go for a walk.

MINDFUL WALKING

Mindful walking is a versatile practice. It can be practiced informally during the day, when for example, you are walking to your car, a meeting, the restroom, or outdoors. You can also treat it as a primary practice. Be patient as you learn to walk ... again, knowing the potential to transform everyday moments of walking into a beneficial mindfulness practice.

Taking mindful walking outdoors adds additional health benefits. Research reports numerous physical and mental-health advantages of walking, including reduced stress, improved mood and cardiovascular health, and boosts in creative thinking. Spending a little time in nature helps alleviate mental fatigue by relaxing and restoring the mind and adding a dose of mindfulness can be a force multiplier for reaping these benefits.

GENERAL PRACTICE GUIDELINES

1. Begin with a slower pace, finding a sweet spot where you are walking slow enough to attend to the more granular aspects of movement while maintaining a comfortable balance. This will add an element of contemplation and keep you engaged. You may find it awkward at first, feeling the urge to pick things up, and there will be times when you do so without realizing it. When you notice that this happens, slow down.

2. Given the mind's tendency to wander, you may spend a good deal of time lost in thought — worrying, anticipating, marveling, ruminating, thinking about what you are seeing, even daydreaming. As with the other practices, this is to be expected. When you notice mind wandering, return to the experience of walking.
3. As a formal practice, keep things simple as you gain experience. Begin by walking between 10 and 20 feet and then turning around and walking back to where you began, repeating this process. While practical when indoors, it is a good way to practice outdoors as it helps manage unnecessary distractions, like looking to where you are going and making decisions.

MINDFUL WALKING INSTRUCTIONS

Begin in a standing posture that feels balanced and grounded, evenly distributing your weight. You may want to cup your hand, and rest them comfortably, one in the other, in front of or behind you. Direct your attention to your feet.

Slowly take a step, *paying close attention* to the sensations of lifting the foot, moving it forward a few inches, and gently placing it back on the ground. With conscious deliberation, move each foot, one after the other, in this way.

When you notice your mind wandering, gently bring your attention back to the sensations of the feet moving. If you notice you have sped up, slow down. Every now and then come to a complete stop for a few moments and then resume walking.

This is the essence of mindful walking.

The more you practice mindful walking, the more fully you will appreciate its connection to each of the four primary practices.

AS A FOCUSED ATTENTION PRACTICE

Mindful walking at its most basic level tracks the focused attention practice. The object of attention is the foot in motion and when you notice that your mind has wandered, you bring attention back to the foot.

You can tailor this practice much as you would the focused attention practice by, for example:

- Noting silently to yourself “right . . . left . . . right . . . left” in tandem with the movement of each foot.
- Counting each step from 1 to 10 and, after reaching 10, beginning again.

AS A BODY SCAN PRACTICE

You can view the practice as a body scan where your attention is slowly moving from one part of the body to another, *e.g.*, from foot to foot, or heel to toe.

- Notice the granular physical sensations associated with the movement of the feet, *e.g.*, pressure, temperature, motion. When you notice your mind wandering, return to a felt sense of the foot.

AS AN OPEN MONITORING PRACTICE

A refreshing aspect of this practice, especially when outdoors, is lifting attention from the feet and noticing sights, sounds, smells, the feel of the breeze . . . whatever arises in the field of awareness. The contemporary Japanese practice known as “Forest Bathing” involves being in nature and connecting with it through our senses. It is a way of bridging the gap often perceived between us and the natural world.

Mindful walking as an open monitoring practice offers the opportunity to take in the world around you with an openness and receptivity that can be profound. Colors seem richer and more vibrant, the view comes more fully into three-dimensions, and you notice greater subtlety as your experience is mediated less by discursive thought and judgment. The profundity resides not in there being somethings special happening, but that you are more fully present for what is happening.

- It can be helpful to begin focusing attention on the feet. Then, after a few minutes, looking up and expanding the field of awareness to take in the world around you. By keeping to a slower pace, you will have an easier time savoring your experience.
- If you notice yourself being distracted, slow down and take a few slower, deeper breaths.

Often when walking we are lost in thought. Mindful walking can wake us up out of automatic pilot, allowing you to see the world around you seen more clearly, as it just is. Telltale signs include:

- Colors become more vivid. Light, shade, and contrast becomes sharper.
- Noticing the swaying of trees, and the movement of leaves and flowers.

- You perceive yourself as walking through the terrain. With each step, everything around you moves.
- More fully realizing that you, along with everything around you, is in motion together. You glimpse the interconnectedness of all things. It is no longer you in relationship to everything else, but you as an indivisible part of everything.

AS A CONNECTION/LOVINGKINDNESS PRACTICE

When walking you may see other people. They may be in a hurry, lost in their technology, having an argument, connecting with a friend, or enjoying a leisurely stroll. Periodically, you can slow down and wish them little kindness, silently noting to yourself, “May you be happy,” or “May you be healthy.” You can offer these well wishes to someone you bring to mind, or even . . . yourself.

CLOSING

Mindful walking involves *being present for your experience* while walking. So often when we walk we ruminate about what just took place or fret over what is to come. If instead we were more present for our present-moment experience, even if merely walking from the garage to the office or our front door, we could transform the quality of our experience, and with it the clarity of our mind and emotional well-being. And because we spend so much time on short walks, this can add up to meaningfully enrich our lives. If you have been looking for a new mindfulness practice, or just trying to get in some practice time, you’ll find it’s but a few steps away.



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