

WALKING MEDITATION

Difficulty: **CASUAL** | Frequency: **1X/DAY** | Duration: **10 MINS**



WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

Much of our time is spent rushing from place to place, so preoccupied with our next activity that we don't really notice what we're doing now. We risk not really experiencing our life as we live it.

Practicing mindfulness can help. Mindfulness helps us tune into what we're sensing and experiencing in the present moment—it's the ability to pay more careful attention to our thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations, without judging them as good or bad. Research suggests that it can not only reduce stress but also increase our experience of positive emotions.

One of the basic methods for cultivating mindfulness is a “walking meditation,” which involves focusing closely on the physical experience of walking, paying attention to the specific components of each step. With practice, an everyday action that you do automatically, even mindlessly, can become an opportunity for greater focus and awareness—a habit you can try to bring to other mundane activities as well. Some experts recommend alternating the walking meditation with other forms of meditation to keep your practice varied and determine which form feels best for you.

TIME REQUIRED

10 minutes daily for at least a week. Evidence suggests that mindfulness increases the more you practice it.

HOW TO DO IT

The steps below are adapted from a guided walking meditation led by mindfulness expert [Jon Kabat-Zinn](#). This and other guided meditations can be found in his audiobook, [Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life](#).

1. **Find a location.** Find a lane that allows you to walk back and forth for 10-15 paces—a place that is relatively peaceful, where you won't be disturbed or even observed (since a slow, formal walking meditation can look strange to people who are unfamiliar with it). You can practice walking meditation either indoors or outside in nature. The lane doesn't have to be very long since the goal is not to reach a specific destination, just to practice a very intentional form of walking where you're mostly retracing your steps.
2. **Start your steps.** Walk 10-15 steps along the lane you've chosen, and then pause and breathe for as long as you like. When you're ready, turn and walk back in the opposite direction to the other end of the lane, where you can pause and breathe again. Then, when you're ready, turn once more and continue with the walk.
3. **The components of each step.** Walking meditation involves very deliberating thinking about and doing a series of actions that you normally do automatically. Breaking these steps down in your mind may feel awkward, even ridiculous. But you should try to notice at least these four basic components of each step:
 - a) the lifting of one foot;
 - b) the moving of the foot a bit forward of where you're standing;
 - c) the placing of the foot on the floor, heel first;
 - d) the shifting of the weight of the body onto the forward leg as the back heel lifts, while the toes of that foot remain touching the floor or the ground.

Then the cycle continues, as you:

- a) lift your back foot totally off the ground;
 - b) observe the back foot as it swings forward and lowers;
 - c) observe the back foot as it makes contact with the ground, heel first;
 - d) feel the weight shift onto that foot as the body moves forward.
4. **Speed.** You can walk at any speed, but in Kabat-Zinn’s Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program, walking meditation is slow and involves taking small steps. Most important is that it feel natural, not exaggerated or stylized.
 5. **Hands and arms.** You can clasp your hands behind your back or in front of you, or you can just let them hang at your side—whatever feels most comfortable and natural.
 6. **Focusing your attention.** As you walk, try to focus your attention on one or more sensations that you would normally take for granted, such as your breath coming in and out of your body; the movement of your feet and legs, or their contact with the ground or floor; your head balanced on your neck and shoulders; sounds nearby or those caused by the movement of your body; or whatever your eyes take in as they focus on the world in front of you.
 7. **What to do when your mind wanders.** No matter how much you try to fix your attention on any of these sensations, your mind will inevitably wander. That’s OK—it’s perfectly natural. When you notice your mind wandering, simply try again to focus it one of those sensations.
 8. **Integrating walking meditation into your daily life.** For many people, slow, formal walking meditation is an acquired taste. But the more you practice, even for short periods of time, the more it is likely to grow on you. Keep in mind that you can also bring mindfulness to walking at any speed in your everyday life, and even to running, though of course the pace of your steps and breath will change. In fact, over time, you can try to bring the same degree of awareness to any everyday activity, experiencing the sense of presence that is available to us at every moment as our lives unfold.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

Grossman, P., Niemann, L., Schmidt, S., & Walach, H. (2004). [Mindfulness-based stress reduction and health benefits, A meta-analysis](#) *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 57(1), 35-43.

A meta-analysis of 20 published studies concluded that the [Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program](#) (MBSR), an eight-week training program that includes the walking meditation described above, is effective in improving physical symptoms and psychological well-being among individuals experiencing physical and mental illness (e.g., cancer, heart disease, depression) and among healthy but stressed individuals.

WHY IT WORKS

Walking meditation can help increase awareness both of our internal sensations and our external surroundings, tuning us into experiences that we often miss when we rush on autopilot from place to place. Paying closer attention to the process of walking can also increase our sense of appreciation and enjoyment of our physical bodies. By heightening awareness of mental and physical states, walking meditation—like mindfulness in general—can help us gain a greater sense of control over our thoughts, feelings, and actions, allowing us to respond in more constructive ways when we experience negative thoughts or emotions.

SOURCES

[Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D.](#), Center for Mindfulness at the University of Massachusetts Medical School

This practice is part of [Greater Good in Action](#), a clearinghouse of the best research-tested methods for increasing happiness, resilience, kindness, and connection, created by the [Greater Good Science Center](#) at UC Berkeley and [HopeLab](#).

