

# 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. Research suggests that mindfulness increases the more you practice it.

## HOW TO DO IT

Follow the steps below. Note that this walking exercise can be adapted for wheelchair users.

1. **Find a location.** Find a path that allows you to move back and forth for 10–15 paces, or around 20–40 feet—a place that is relatively peaceful, where you won't be disturbed or even observed (since a slow, formal walking meditation might look strange to people who are unfamiliar with it). You can practice this meditation either indoors or outside in nature. Your path 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 path.
2. **Start your pace.** Take 10–15 steps or wheel yourself for 20–40 feet along the path you've chosen, and then pause and breathe for as long as you like. When you're ready, turn and move back in the opposite direction to the other end of the path, where you can pause and breathe again. Then, when you're ready, turn once more and continue with your journey.
3. **The components of each movement.** This meditation involves very purposefully paying attention while very slowly doing a series of actions that you normally do automatically. Breaking these movements down in your mind may feel awkward, even ridiculous. But you should try to notice at least these four basic components:
  - the lifting of one foot;
  - the moving of the foot a bit forward of where you're standing;
  - the placing of the foot on the floor, heel first;
  - 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.

If you use a wheelchair, you might try to notice:

- the placing of your hands on the handrims;

- the pressure of pushing your hands and arms forward and down;
  - the releasing of your hands off the handrails;
  - the rolling and direction of the chair.
4. **Speed.** You can move at any speed, but in Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program, this meditation is slow and involves small movements. Most important is that it feels natural, not exaggerated or stylized.
  5. **Hands and arms.** If you are walking, you can clasp your hands behind your back or in front of you, or you can just let them hang at your side. If you are using a wheelchair, move your hands and arms as you normally would. Do whatever feels most comfortable and natural.
  6. **Focusing your attention.** As you move, 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, legs, and arms; the contact of your body or wheelchair 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 focus your attention on any of these sensations, your mind is bound to wander. That's OK—it's perfectly natural. When you notice your mind wandering, simply try again to reorient your attention toward one of those sensations.
  8. **Making this meditation part of your daily life.** For many people, slow, formal 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 movement 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 level 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

Teut, M., Roesner, E. J., Ortiz, M., Reese, F., Binting, S., Roll, S., Fischer, H. F., Michalsen, A., Willich, S. N., & Brinkhaus, B. (2013). [Mindful walking in psychologically distressed individuals: A randomized controlled trial](#). *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine*, 2013, 7.

Across four weeks, German adults with moderate to severe psychological distress attended eight 60-minute group sessions of mindful walking training, which each included at least 10 minutes of Walking Meditation. Compared to a group who did not participate, they experienced significant reductions in psychological stress symptoms and improvements in quality of life.

### Who Has Tried the Practice?

Participants in the above study were over 90% female and had an average age of about 50 years old. Additional research has engaged members of various groups outside Germany:

- [Brazilian undergraduate students](#) who engaged in Walking Meditation for 200 meters experienced heightened positive emotion and enhanced emotional response compared to those who walked normally, as measured by their brain activity.
- [Adults in the Netherlands](#) who participated in a guided one-, three-, six-, or 10-day mindful walking retreat increased in mindfulness and positive emotions compared to those who did not attend.
- [Elderly Thai adults](#) with depression who practiced 20-30 minutes of Walking Meditation two to three times a week for 12 weeks improved in depressive symptoms and cardiovascular health compared to those who spent the same amount of time walking normally.
- [American older adults](#) who attended eight 30-minute Walking Meditation sessions reported lower levels of negative emotion afterward compared to before beginning the program.

Walking Meditation (also known as mindful walking) is one of the mindfulness practices included in [Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction](#) (MBSR). Developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn and based on [Buddhist teachings](#), MBSR is a six- to

10-week program that teaches various mindfulness techniques through weekly sessions and homework assignments. Research suggests that MBSR benefits the mental health of various groups, including the following:

- People in different cultures and countries, such as bilingual [Latin-American families](#), university students in [China](#), disadvantaged families in [Hong Kong](#), low-income cyclo drivers in [Vietnam](#), males with generalized anxiety disorder in [Iran](#), Indigenous people in the [Republic of Congo](#), and [Aboriginal Australians](#).
- Women around the world, including [pregnant women](#) in China, [rural women](#) in India who experienced still-birth, [at-risk women](#) in Iran, [Muslim women college students](#) in the United Arab Emirates, American [survivors of intimate partner violence](#), and socioeconomically disadvantaged [Black women](#) with post-traumatic stress disorder.
- People with certain diseases, such as New Zealanders with [rheumatoid arthritis](#), male patients with [heart disease](#) in India, patients with [diabetes](#) in South Korea, [cancer](#) patients in Canada, [breast cancer](#) survivors in China, and HIV-positive individuals in [Toronto](#), [San Francisco](#), [Iran](#), and [South Africa](#).

More research is needed to explore whether, and how, the impact of this practice extends to other groups and cultures.

## WHY TO TRY IT

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

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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](#).

