

## **Walking Can Help Creative Thinking**

Are you a regular walker? If so, have you noticed a relationship between walking and your ability to think creatively? This question was addressed in a compelling series of experiments by Oppezzo and Schwartz at Stanford University. To measure free-flowing creative thinking, the researchers used the Guilford alternate uses test to assess the ability to think in new ways (also known as cognitive flexibility or divergent thinking). The authors' working definition of "creativity" is "the production of appropriate novelty."

Several experiments were designed by the authors. First, 48 undergraduate students were asked to sit and perform cognitive tasks, then walk on a treadmill and perform cognitive tasks. Second, experimental conditions were mixed as participants were asked to sit and then walk, sit and then sit, or walk and then sit (performing cognitive tasks at each condition). By mixing the order of the trials, the researchers hoped to minimize the effect of practice on the creativity assessments. Third, participants walked outdoors instead of walking on a treadmill, and the four conditions with cognitive tasks were again used: sit — sit, sit — walk, walk -sit, and walk — walk. Finally, the researchers attempted to separate the effect of simply being outdoors from the effect of physically walking; the four conditions were sit out (participants were pushed in wheelchairs), walkout (outdoors), sit-in, and walk-in (indoors). All participants in the fourth experiment took the Barron symbolic equivalence test, an assessment involving the creation of analogies.

The main finding is that walking significantly enhances creativity and divergent thinking whether outdoors or on a treadmill. In the first three experiments, 81%, 88%, and 100% of the participants were more creative when walking. And in the fourth experiment, 100% of the outdoor walkers were able to come up with a novel analogy as compared with only 50% of those seated inside. Interestingly, walking also made participants talkative, and this talk often included more creative ideas. The beneficial cognitive effects of walking continued even when people sat down after walking.

Unanswered questions include: how long of a walk is necessary? Is there a dose-response relationship? In other words, does walking longer make a person even more creative? Do other forms of low- to moderate-intensity activities have similar effects on creative thinking? And does walking alone yield the same creative benefits as walking and talking to others? The authors address some of the potential mechanisms by which the brain is made more flexible and divergent, but much remains to be discovered.

The bottom line? Walking is not only good for the body — it's good for the mind! If you have a brainstorming session coming up, take a walk immediately before. If you're trying to solve a problem in a new way, take a hike!

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