Walking will invigorate body, mind, and spirit
By Leslie Becker-Phelps, PhD

Wouldn’t it be great if you could do something simple that would leave you feeling happier and more energetic? Well, there is… and it’s not taking Prozac. It’s walking. No doubt, you don’t think much about it most of the time--you just do it. Even the most sedentary people walk, even if it is no more than to and from their cars. All walking is a form of movement, and movement naturally feels good to us. If you do enough of it, we call it exercise and it has even greater benefits.

Many people are more aware of the physical benefits of walking than the psychological ones. This is unfortunate because walking is extremely beneficial for your emotional and psychological health. Consider the following benefits of walking, as well as any other exercising:

**Being happier.** Walking regularly can help you attain a better outlook on life. Some studies have linked moderate exercise to decreased depression.

**Decreased stress.** At its most basic level, walking provides an opportunity to move. In addition, walking gives you time away from your stressors and a chance to breathe fully and deeply. All of these things are stress relievers. By distancing yourself physically and emotionally from your stressors, you will feel more equipped to cope with them when you return.

**Increased level of energy.** People who walk regularly have more energy. One study revealed that people felt less tense and had more energy after walking as little as ten minutes.

**Remaining cognitively agile.** Many studies show that physically active elderly people do better than their sedentary peers on cognitive tasks, such as reasoning, vocabulary, memory, concentration and reaction time. Some studies show similar results with young people, although these results vary.

**Improved self-image.** Walking regularly can help improve your sense of well-being and improve your self-esteem.

**Improved sleep.** People who exercise regularly fall asleep more quickly and sleep more soundly. This is a psychological benefit because good sleep translates to being more engaged, having better concentration, and thinking through ideas more clearly. Getting good sleep can also make us feel more vital and happier.

**Weight control.** If all of the above reasons are not enough incentive to walk, keep in mind that you can help control your body weight through walking (along with healthy eating). By burning more calories than you take in, you reduce body fat—that is, you lose weight. So, the more you walk, the more you burn. And, by obtaining and maintaining a healthy weight, you will feel better about yourself. Given all of these benefits, you cannot deny that walking can provide a boost to your emotional health. Even
so, you might still be resistant to doing it. As we all know, motivation is one thing, but having enough motivation to overcome inertia is another. Get over this hump with good planning and the right way of thinking.

Consider whether walking appeals to you. Walking has a different appeal to different people. For some, they use the uninterrupted time to catch up with a friend. For others, they enjoy the peace of blocking out the world as they walk alone. In addition, it provides an opportunity to enjoy feeling your body in motion, observe your environment, and to see that the world is much more than the details of your life. Walking also provides all the benefits of many other forms of exercise with few of the hassles. It is easy to do. You don’t need any special equipment, other than a good pair of walking shoes. You don’t need to drive to any special location (like a field or a gym), leaving you free to walk at work, at home, or any place else. And, you don’t have to be particularly coordinated—an important factor for those of us whose two left hands are matched by two left feet.

Set appropriate goals for yourself. If your exercise goals are too lofty, they will remain a pipe dream. So, be realistic. You can increase your walking with some relatively minor adjustments in your daily routine. Take the stairs at work, park a little farther away, or find the least direct route to your destination when at work or at the mall. And, while you’re at it, pick up the pace. Even with a moderate increase in walking, you will notice an improvement in your mood. If you’re up for a greater challenge, enjoy taking brisk walks when you can. In fact, brisk walking three times a week for at least thirty minutes each time increases your cardiorespiratory fitness. While it is important to exert yourself, don’t over do it. You know you are walking at the right intensity if you are walking fast but can still hold a conversation. One wonderful benefit of this kind of walking is that it releases endorphins-- your body’s natural happy drug!

Note the benefits of your exercise routine. Pay attention to the immediate increase in energy that you feel. Or, if you are tired after really pushing yourself, be aware of how your energy rebounds after a brief period of time. When you establish a routine, you will also see how you maintain some of the benefits listed above. Consciously noticing these changes helps you enjoy them more and stay motivated. By taking action, you can be happier, feel better about yourself, and feel less stressed. Action, of course, does take effort. But, be assured, that the solution is, well, a walk in the park!

Leslie Becker-Phelps, PhD, is a licensed psychologist who treats individuals and couples in her private practice in Basking Ridge and has presented nationally on a variety of mental health issues. She is the relationships expert on WebMD’s Relationships and Coping Community; writes a blog, “The Art of Relationships,” for WebMD; and writes another blog called “Making Change” for Psychology Today. She is also the author of Insecure in Love: How Anxious Attachment Can Make You Feel Jealous, Needy, and Worried and What You Can Do About It (New Harbinger Publications that is due to be released in May 2014. Read more at www.drbecker-phelps.com.