

The Simple Joy of Mindful Walking: Five Steps to Change Your Outlook

Buzzard's Bay Coalition

by Jessica Webb

We all know that taking a walk outside in nature is healthy for us. But taking a deliberately *mindful* walk outdoors can be the ideal mood-shifter. During this pandemic when group gatherings are discouraged, spending time alone in nature with the intention to do it mindfully can be a great way to reconnect to yourself.

What is Mindful Walking?

Mindful walking is different from our usual automatic way of getting from point "a" to point "b." With mindful walking, we really aren't focused on where we'll end up, but rather, *how we feel* with every step we are taking. Typically done alone, a mindful walk in nature invites us to slow down our fast everyday pace, to look around in all directions, to feel our breath, and to soak in the environment through all our senses.

Step 1: Get Outside.

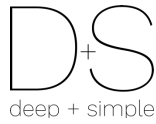
Take yourself anywhere in nature. Remember, it's not the place that matters most, but how you experience it that makes it mindful. It could be as close as your backyard, the park down the street, a beach, a wooded path, or an urban greenspace.

Step 2: Go Device-Free.

Try to leave cameras and cell phones at home or in the car. Think of this walk as a unique opportunity to disconnect from your devices. There may be a moment on your mindful walk when you *really* want to snap that photo of something special. But on a mindful walk, all you have to do *notice this impulse* and see if you can use all of your senses to be present for what you're seeing instead. Then, you can share the experience in detail with your friends rather than simply posting an image of it. Of course, if you feel safer bringing your phone with you, keep it on silent.

Step 3: Notice Your Senses.

Now that you've begun your walk, begin to take notice of all five senses. Ask yourself, "What am I **seeing**?" You may catch the soft dance of leaves on a breeze. "Can I **hear** anything?" Perhaps cars are driving by in the distance or a woodpecker is knocking on a hollow tree trunk. "What can I **smell** right now?" It might be a hint of pine or honeysuckle. "Can I **taste** anything?" This morning's cup of coffee or afternoon snack



may still linger on the palate. Last but not least, notice what your **body** can sense on the skin, under the feet, or as a whole. "What is my body feeling?" Perhaps it's an uneven surface, a cooling breeze on the forearms, the way the sun warms the cheeks, or an overall buzzing.

Step 4: Pause. Breathe. Receive.

Every so often on your walk, invite yourself to slow down and come to a complete stop. Take a deep, full breath in through the nose, close your eyes, and exhale out the mouth. Keeping your eyes closed, take two more slow, deliberate deep breaths. (Yes, really!) Then, *very slowly* open your eyes up again. You may wish to take your gaze upwards, slowly turn around, or even squat down to look closely at the earth. Be receptive to *everything* -- the smell of moss, the airplane overhead, the stretch of the skin as your knees bend, the weight of a seashell in the palm of your hand.

Step 5: Be The Camera.

Like the guidance in Step 2, a mindful walk is an opportunity to let your own innate mindfulness be like a camera lens. Take in a panoramic vista view (even if it's looking around your own backyard). Then, tighten your aperture to get up close and personal with the teeny, tiny universe that's right in front of your toes (even if it's a four-inch-square patch of grass). Then, take a few more steps or walk further on and notice what else sharing this moment with you?

Taking a mindful walk in nature can evoke a kaleidoscope's array of thoughts, memories, and emotions, too. Welcome them! You may be startled by a sound or you may have a bittersweet recollection, or a longing for a companion on your walk. Notice these experiences as welcome companion pieces to your mindful walk. Remember, the goal of a mindful walk is not to push away things, but rather to allow your *entire* experience (the pleasant *and* the unpleasant) to be included.

Mary Oliver put it this way in her poem, "Instructions for Living a Life:"

*Pay attention.
Be astonished.
Tell about it.*

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