

Take a walk

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Can a simple walk in the park make us happier writers? Is the art of putting one foot in front of the other the most natural way of brightening our outlook on our writing life? Or is walking away from a stressful situation simply a natural physical defence mechanism, harking back to our mammoth-slaying days?

Between January and September 2006, I was busy walking between ten and 30 miles a week, fulfilling a contract for my book *Best Walks in the Welsh Borders* (£11.99, Frances Lincoln) as well as numerous walks and route descriptions for magazines like *Country Walking*, *Country & Border Life*, *Walking Wales*, and *Outdoor Pursuits*.

Then, in the first quarter of 2007, I was hit twice with severe back pain. Unable to get out of bed for days at a time, I appeared to be paying the price for being hunched up over a keyboard for up to ten hours a day. Looking back over the previous year, I realised I'd experienced no back pain at all whilst tackling my regular walking commitments. Evidence, seemingly, that simple exercise really does keep the body healthy. So although going for a walk would take me away from my writing desk and, as I perceived it, cut into my writing time, I decided to build a short walk into my daily routine.

Within two weeks I was pain free. Yet, as the weeks became months, I also noticed another change. My mood improved. My general outlook on life was more positive. As a freelance writer and author, a constant concern is where the next job or cheque is coming from. But now, whilst the uncertainty of freelance writing has not diminished, my worrying about it has. My conscious effort during the day to literally walk away from my desk, stretch my legs, feed my brain with fresh air and have some time to myself is paying dividends. I am happier.

Simon Brett's article about writers and depression (*The Author*, Autumn 2007) emphasised the battle we find ourselves up against. Working alone, trying to cope with rejection on a regular basis (and therefore feeling a constant failure), is part of our day-to-day routine. Meanwhile, Caroline Dunford offered some practical steps on how to cope with rejection, stay motivated and survive professionally during the economic downturn (*The Author*, Winter 2008). However, as the months and years have passed, I've continued to escape from my computer for about 45 minutes every day, and my mental health has improved, along with my physical health. So, why then do others find it surprising that physical exercise can help our attitude and creativity, when our ideas and inspiration stem from the third biggest organ in our body – the brain?

There is overwhelming evidence that going for a walk stimulates chemicals in our brains, which helps to lift our mood. Graeme Hilditch, author of *Is It Just Me Or Are Sit-ups A Waste of Time?* (Metro Books) says, 'Exercise causes the body to produce

endorphins and the hormone serotonin. Both have been clinically proven to have key roles in helping people with depression. People suffering from depression invariably have low levels of serotonin, so with the help of regular exercise, serotonin levels can be raised to help combat the symptoms of depression, without the need for drugs.'

Serotonin is found throughout the body, including in the blood and the digestive tract. But it is also found in our brains where it acts as a neurotransmitter, assisting with the transmission of nerve impulses between nerve cells. Endorphins have a similar chemical structure to morphine and are the body's own mechanism for relieving pain. However, they also play a part in the body's attempt to control stress by regulating the contractions in the intestinal wall, as well as helping to determine mood. Put the two together and they show how the body produces its own pain-killing, mood-enhancing chemical, as well as providing the mechanism for distributing it around the brain.

There's more good news about how stretching our legs can improve our mood. I'm no fell runner, hardened hiker or long-distance walker. I set off for about half an hour and cover just over two miles. To benefit from this natural endorphin release, we don't need to be training for the London Olympics. A walk in the park can be just as beneficial.

Simon Brett also discussed in his article another conundrum: are people who are more disposed to depression inclined to become writers or is it the life of a writer that increases their chances of becoming depressed? If it is the latter, a daily walk has the potential to halt this. 'Due to the ease with which many people suffering from depression can get hold of strong "brain chemical altering" drugs,' says Graeme Hilditch, 'many people simply rely on them to help them with their symptoms. However, studies into how regular exercise can help sufferers are growing all the time and the effects cannot be ignored. In one study, ten regular joggers were compared to ten sedentary men of a similar age. Studies showed that the ten sedentary men not only suffered more severely from symptoms of depression but that they had higher levels of cortisol (often called the stress hormone) and lower levels of endorphins.'

According to the Mental Health Foundation's 2005 report *Up and Running*, 'research shows that a supervised programme of exercise can be as effective as antidepressants in treating mild or moderate depression.' It goes on to say that, 'there are strong reasons for promoting exercise therapy as a first line treatment for mild or moderate depression. Exercise has far fewer negative side effects, is a sustainable recovery choice, promotes social inclusion and is a popular treatment.' It is also associated with improved cognitive functioning and, according to a study of

Japanese-Americans, people who walk less than quarter of a mile each day are twice as likely to develop dementia as men who walk more than two miles.

So a positive mental attitude and the potential for increased creativity may only be a few steps away. The key to such benefits is duration and regularity. As Graeme Hilditch advises, 'Exercise should be taken for no less than 30 minutes at a time. A minimum of four times a week, preferably five or six, helps to keep the body producing endorphins and serotonin.'

And I wholeheartedly agree. Every day, I go for a wander around my locality for about 45 minutes. If I'm stuck on a project or the words won't flow, I put on my shoes and head out into the fresh air. Walking away from my desk frees my mind. The fresh air not only clears my head, but also provides the solutions, or inspires more ideas. Even though I'm not hunched over my desk typing, I now view my walk as part of my writing time. It's where I have more ideas and solve most of my writing problems.

Give it a go for a month. Every day. No matter what the weather. It'll be a positive step to becoming a more creative writer. Now, if you'll excuse me, the great outdoors is calling. It's what makes me happy.

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