



Walk your talk

I know that Spring Day on the first of September is more of a symbolic celebration rather than the actual start of a milder season. Down in the Western Cape we still have snow on the mountains and up-country the August winds have turned chilly.

But the weather is changing and those of us who are suffering from acute cabin fever made worse by the Covid-19 self-isolation rules, have itchy feet.

Take the opportunity to step outside and get moving. And no I am not adding yet another chore to your to-do list. I want you to incorporate more movement in your day while doing other things like walking and talking.

Having a meeting with a colleague while taking a walk is a brilliant way to kill two birds with one stone - you get work done and exercise at the same time. But more than that, it makes for better thinking and problem-solving.

People have been walking and talking since antiquity, think of pilgrimages for example. In fact it is a phenomenon which probably developed as our thinking brain advanced. You might know or even be someone who paces while contemplating a problem or while speaking on the cell phone. Such people are mostly unaware of it and although they are a real nuisance in the supermarket, there is a good reason for walking to and fro. Simply put, we think better when we walk because our motor and our thinking processes are functionally related. In fact, some brain regions integrate both motor and cognitive functions.

A Stanford study has shown that **creative thinking improves while a person is walking** and even shortly thereafter. And it doesn't matter if we walk indoors on a treadmill or outdoors, or even in a bustling street. It seems that the act of walking rather than the environment makes the difference. Here is why?

1. **Biological factors** - This includes increased heart rate and improved blood flow to muscles, organs and also the brain.

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2. Improved mood - We know that physical exercise enhances our mood and that a positive mood has been linked with improved divergent thinking which generate creative ideas by:

- exploring many possible solutions,
- seeing the world in new ways,
- identifying hidden patterns,
- making connections between seemingly unrelated phenomena, and
- generating solutions.

The researchers do however point out that other research has shown that negative emotions can lead to increased artistic creativity.

3. Cognitive mechanisms such as memory attention.

As Ferris Jabr in The New Yorker explains, because we don't really have to think about the act of walking, it leaves our attention free to wander; 'to overlay the world before us with a parade of images from the mind's theatre.' This, he says, is precisely the kind of mental state that studies have linked to innovative ideas and strokes of insight.

Walking on a regular basis 'also promotes new connections between brain cells, staves off the usual withering of brain tissue that comes with age, increases the volume of the hippocampus (a brain region crucial for memory), and elevates levels of molecules that both stimulate the growth of new neurons and transmit messages between them.'

As the Stanford researchers also showed in their study, walking has a strong influence on the expression of associative memory or our ability to learn and remember the relationship between unrelated items. People in the study came up with more ideas and with more ideas that tapped into their unique associative network. The researchers suggest that when there is a premium on generating new ideas in the workplace, it should be beneficial to incorporate walks.

So there you go, take your body and mind for a walk.

Although they admit that more work has to be done on explaining the link between walking, thinking and talking, they conclude that walking is an easy-to-implement strategy to increase appropriate novel idea generation' and combating the physiological effects of a sedentary lifestyle. And they warn that schools and other learning institutions' favouring the mind over the body and 'seated academics' over physical education, are ignoring the tight interdependence between body and mind.

And I couldn't agree more. I get so excited every time I see another Facebook video of school kids doing the *Jerusalem Jive*. It means they are moving which means they are stimulating their minds. But I wonder, why are the teachers aren't joining them?

So next time you need to chat to a colleague or two, take a walk around the school yard in stead of sitting in an office. While working on a problem or project, you can simultaneously improve your physical, mental and emotional health. Who knows, before long you are ready to join the *Jersualema*-troop!

Keep well
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