

# Walking for mental health and well-being

## Abstract

Walking is one of the easiest ways to keep healthy. It does not require technical skill or complex equipment. It can be fitted flexibly into personal routines. It is a low-impact activity, both on the pocket and the knees but deep in its positive impact on both mind and body. It fosters a touch with nature and builds spaces for reflection and self-discovery. It can be done solo, in families, with friends or colleagues. It is possible to start with short trails and extend horizons gradually. This article shares stories from personal and professional experiences. As a psychiatrist, I could not recommend walking enough, for the extensive benefits it can have on people's lives both physically and mentally.

## *When mental health professionals get together*

At the last bank holiday weekend of May 2023, blessed by the most perfect hiking weather I have ever seen (a bright sun without the glaring blaze, a light breeze not a blustery wind, excellent visibility, and turquoise blue skies), I joined 5 colleagues and another friend in completing the Yorkshire 3 peaks. We did not make the 12-hour challenge time, but we completed the circuit in high spirits and legs intact. Most importantly, we enjoyed ourselves, gave time to let the sun ripple on our faces, took some amazing pictures and made wonderful memories.

Our ages ranged from twenties to fifties. Most of us are mental health professionals, ranging from backgrounds in psychiatry, psychiatric nursing, and psychotherapy.

We have bonded with our love of the outdoors, hiking trails and the satisfaction of conquering uphill trails. Two years ago, we raised more than £1500 for a charity by walking a 40-mile trail in Leicestershire which included some lovely chocolate box villages in Oakham and then encircled a large part of Rutland Waters. Yes, you can walk 40 miles in a single day and survive to tell the story. What your body can achieve when you push it is at times unbelievable. My toenails took several months to recover but I consider them honourable wounds.

We passionately believe in the outdoors and walking being a great way to improve one's mental health, connect with nature, take a step back from busy lives and reflect.

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Cite as: Chakraborty, N. (2024)  
Walking for mental health and  
wellbeing. Sushruta J Health  
Pol vol16;issue1: art 10 DOI  
10.38192/16.1.10

Article Information  
Submitted Feb24  
Published Mar24

The Yorkshire 3 peaks certainly give a lot of scope for this. Being on the trail for around 12 hours and more, surrounded by mountains and summer flowers, is a recipe for finding oneself deep within. This is the second time I have done the trial. Every time, I promise myself never again. And then as I reminisce, I think... maybe next year, once again. The thought of having walked 40 km in a day and at the same time having climbed more than the height of Ben Nevis (the total elevation gains for Pen-y-Ghent, Wharfedale and Ingleborough taken together is just that) is both intimidating and satisfying.

Look around and there is plenty to choose from in the midlands, close to home. Leicestershire was mentioned in the June 2022 issue of Country Walking, with David Attenborough himself having attested to the variety of flora and fauna in the area. We also have on our hiking CV a beautiful November walk, the 15-mile circuit of Charnwood Peaks. This excellent circular walk takes in some amazing spots in Leicestershire including Old John, the Old Man of Beacon Hill, a quarry lake, and miles of woodland before ending in the fairy-tale-like village of Newton Linford. It starts and ends in the sprawling grounds of Bradgate Park. Chilly though it was, we caught the end of fading autumn colours. Personally, and professionally, we could not recommend anything better than a long walk in the countryside, taking in the sights, learning about local history and geology, chatting with friends, and immersing oneself in nature. Ending it all with a well-earned pub meal, was the cherry on top of the cake.

***Not only do we do it ourselves, but we also take our patients with us sometimes.***

With summer easing into autumn, September 2022 turned out to be a fantastic month for walking. Planning weekend after weekend over-enthusiastically, it was only as I entered the month that it sunk in-I had planned three consecutive weekends of serious walking. On 10th September I did Yorkshire 3 Peaks (for the first time) with another consultant colleague and my daughter, guided by Andy Higson from Blackdog Outdoors; on the 16 and 17th I hiked in the Peak District; and then finished the month with city walking in London

24th night into 25th during the Shine Night Walk where I did the full marathon distance. In total, more than 100 km in 3 weekends.

My proudest project though was the walks in the Peak District arranged with colleagues who work with me in mental health, alongside Blackdog Outdoors our enthusiastic partners. We organised these hikes for our patients who had suffered from and conquered psychosis. The walks were a journey of discovery for everyone, pushing ourselves to our full potential and working together as a team to support each other. People found confidence, a new hobby, and a connection to nature. For three nights we stayed at YHA Ravenstor and did circular walks from the beautiful mansion which houses the hostel. We would walk all day, cook together in the evening, and then play games and chat. 9 patients, 5 staff from the NHS and 3 staff from Blackdog Outdoors- that was our team.

We gained funding from the Carlton Hayes Fund in our Trust which encourages innovative activities for patients outside treatment as usual. The aims we put forward were:

- 1) Reduction of stigma: The advertisement and promotion planned for the trip would hopefully affect stigma on a wider scale through presence on social media and potentially other media outlets. Serious mental illness did not stop people from participating in adventure activities, living their lives to the fullest and achieving dreams.
- 2) Add to the journey of recovery from psychosis: the chance to rebuild resilience and confidence.
- 3) Skills acquisition: the opportunity to gain skills in hiking and navigation, invaluable transferable skills in communication, teamwork, flexibility and problem-solving, that would increase our patients' chances of being successful in applications for employment in the future.
- 4) It would give hope and motivation for people to use the outdoors to build on physical health. People with psychosis are seen to have lives shorter by around two decades compared to the rest of the population. The 'Walking to

Recovery' project was the first step in the initiative to help promote both physical and mental fitness.

The trip was mentioned in social media and Leicester Mercury with much well-deserved appreciation. It was not just about the nine people we supported for the trip, it was the wider message it relayed about psychosis and serious mental illness. We are in the process of planning another 3-day trip to the Peak District in August 2023.

### ***Why and how did we plan to take our patients hiking?***

The idea for the weekend came from two UK-wide initiatives:

1. **Mountains for the Mind** is a great initiative which can turn around lives and help people discover purpose. It is a campaign from Trail magazine promoting the benefits of being outside for better mental health. They believe in the power of mountains to change lives. The campaign encourages conversations about mental health, encourages people to get outdoors and ends the stigma.
2. **Walk 1000 miles** (in a year) is a campaign by Country Walking, a UK best-selling walking magazine supported by some of the biggest outdoor brands. #walk1000miles is an honesty-based challenge shared by tens of thousands of participants.

Reading around these initiatives, I searched for companies which had signed up for them, had experience working with the NHS and focussed on mental health. Blackdog Outdoors fitted the bill.

Our walking/hiking project has grown. We now do monthly hikes for our patients locally, sometimes supported by Blackdog Outdoors. One of our speciality doctors does an occasional 'walking clinic'. Instead of seeing patients in the traditional indoor clinic space, they are invited to a park, and do a walk with her and community psychiatric nurses. She finds space and time during the walk to talk to them individually to catch up confidentially. Of

course, patients for such a clinic need to be selected carefully and it cannot be a very frequent occurrence. But innovations such as these keep our therapeutic relationship with patients strong and fresh and bring enthusiasm and motivation to the team.

### **What does the existing evidence say?**

A scoping review by Kelly et al found that over the last 20 years, the evidence base for the beneficial effects of walking for mental health has grown but remains fragmented and incomplete for some important outcomes. The evidence is strongest for depression and anxiety, but many mental health outcomes have been unexplored, or have relatively less evidence against them. The evidence does appear to suggest though that there are added benefits to outdoor walking compared to indoor, treadmill-based walking. Hence there is an added effect from the environment over and above the exercise component of walking as an activity. The evidence base to demonstrate the effects of walking on mental health is growing but more needs to be done to address the gaps. For example, walking and resilience have not been explored thoroughly. Most of the research has focussed on depression and anxiety rather than personal well-being.

### ***Final reflections***

I climbed Mount Kilimanjaro when I turned 40 as a birthday present to myself. I had never done a major hike before and the experience was a life changer, something deeply transformative.

Closer to home, like many others, COVID pushed me to discover more of the UK than I would have done otherwise. In 2021, as a family we climbed Blencathra, walked around Derwent Water in a Lake District weekend; explored the Roaches and Ramshaw rocks, circled the Tittesworth reservoir on a Peak District weekend; did the Hungerford to Newbury section of the Avon-Kennet canal walk in Berkshire; spent a weekend in the Cotswolds doing Coaley Peak and another day of village hopping. That was also the year I did the 40-mile walk and Charnwood Peaks with my colleagues.

A 10-day trip to Scotland in August 2021, included several walks guided by the [website](#). Touching 95 km in total in a combination of long and short walks, my favourites were the Quiraing in the Isle of Skye, a loop around Glen Affric which takes in part of the Glen Affric Kintail way and Badrallach to Scoraig near Ullapool. We stayed in Garvault House in Sutherland which prides itself on being the most remote B and B in mainland Britain. It offers numerous walks in various directions if you are not afraid to go off-trail roads in some parts.

In the most wonderful coincidence, I had taken Kerri Andrews' *Wanderers: A History of Women Walking*, along with me on the Scotland trip. It was a perfect combination, hiking out during the day and snuggling up at night with the stories of women from past eras who had made walking an art, meditation and nirvana rolled into one. There were many inspirational tales but the one that moved me the most deeply was that of Cheryl Strayed. Her book *'Wild'* records the journey of a young woman distraught by the sudden bereavement of her mother and struggling to find meaning in life and relationships, embarking on a three-month hike of the Pacific Crest Trail. If you are looking for examples of how walking can change lives and affect mental health, *'Wild'* is must-read.

In August 2022, I hiked the Valley of Flowers and Hemkund Sahib trails in Uttarakhand state of India. I did the trip solo, entirely on public transport. The reactions of my own country to finding a not-so-young woman, travelling on her own and more importantly hiking, were interesting. On one hand, I had curiosity and questioning ('Are you married?' do you have children?' did your family permit you?'), but the praise and accolades were plentiful as well. Not least, the local hiking community for those days nicknamed me 'Bullet Train' as my stamina turned out to be better than many of

the younger hikers. Certainly, a reason for some smug satisfaction. Entering the Valley of Flowers before anyone else, to have the entire expanse of pink, purple, white, and cream spread ahead of me, with Mount Nanda Devi in the backdrop, is a defining moment in my life; very close to witnessing the crater of Kilimanjaro.

All walking does not have to be adventurous and complicated. I walk to work most days, and back. It is a good half an hour either way. It is a chance to reflect, plan and introspect.

To bring the love of walking into work to influence the lives of my patients and build deeper relationships with my colleagues has been a gift which will keep me going as a clinician for a few more years.

My story and message about walking is not about 30 minutes of exercise, five times a week and the evidence behind it. It is not about blood pressure levels, glucose, and cholesterol. Of course, those benefits stand as well. The real gains are much deeper, the potential boundless. For a simple action, one foot before the other, walking takes you any distance you want to go.

Aim for the horizons or just within your heart (pun intended).

#### Further reading

Kelly P, Williamson C, Niven AG, et al. Walking on sunshine: a scoping review of the evidence for walking and mental health; *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 2018;52:800-806.

<https://www.nationalforest.org/visit/activities/charnwood-peaks-walk>

<https://www.nationalforest.org/sites/default/files/content-type/activities/files/5%20-%20Charnwood%20Peaks%20%28Web%29.pdf>

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<https://www.walk1000miles.co.uk/>