

Walking to Wellness



Exercise for Physical and Emotional Health Second Edition

Participant Workbook

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VA



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This workbook can be downloaded at <https://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn16/walking-to-wellness-manuals.asp>.

To request a hardcopy of this workbook or submit questions for the authors, please contact VISN16SCMIRECCEducation@va.gov.

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Introduction

What is Walking to Wellness?

Although there are many books, Internet websites, and classes for people who want to increase their exercise, we noticed that most of these programs focus on physical health.

Walking to Wellness is a collection of information and activity guides to help you use physical activity to feel better physically and *emotionally*.

How Can Walking to Wellness Help Me?

A brisk walk or other physical activity can improve your mood quickly and help you feel better for up to several hours. Regular walking can also help reduce anxiety and depression symptoms over long periods of time.

The suggestions in this collection are designed to help you use exercise for emotional health. There are tip sheets that give you basic information about the benefits of exercise. Worksheets are included to help you plan activity that fits your motivation and personal situation. There are also personal logs to help you record your experiences so that you can learn what works best for you.

If you are already active, the suggestions in *Walking to Wellness* may help you enjoy exercise more and get more emotional benefit. If you have not been doing any regular physical activity, the activities are designed to help you start regular walking during the next few weeks. You may choose a different kind of exercise or progress at a different pace that is better for you. We especially recommend walking because it is easy and safe for most people and there is substantial scientific evidence that walking is good for physical and mental health.



Introduction

Walking for wellness is activity that you do in addition to any walking you must do for your daily chores, self-care, or work. You may feel that you are so stressed that you will not have time or energy to do any more. Can you give yourself 5-10 minutes at least 3 days during the next week? That's enough time to start some physical activity for your personal wellness. You do not have to make a big commitment to get started.

You may be able to use the *Walking to Wellness* materials as part of a wellness class or with a wellness coach. You may also use these materials on your own. Just as with any other learning activity, you will benefit most if you read and think carefully about the information and if you take the time to do the worksheets and keep a log. Each person's situation and response to exercise is different. Completing the personal logs can help you observe how you respond to exercise and learn what seems to work best for you.

Follow your health care provider's advice about any activity limitations based on your health status.

How Does Physical Activity Affect Health?

Let's begin with a look at why "exercise is medicine." Read the tip sheet "Benefits of Exercise" (page 3) to learn about some of the important benefits of exercise that have been discovered in scientific studies. Some of these benefits can be felt almost immediately, but others build gradually after several weeks of regular activity. Making time to be active almost every day will bring you slowly and surely to the most benefit from your efforts.



Tip Sheet: Benefits of Exercise

Exercise can give you immediate and long-term mind and body benefits.

Exercise helps you manage stress and feel better!

1. Your brain releases more chemicals linked to positive feelings.
2. You get relief from stress in the moment.
3. Your brain circulates more blood and your ability to plan and organize, and your memory may improve.
4. You can relax and sleep better.
5. Your mood and confidence improve after completing even small exercise goals.
6. Other tasks become easier to do because you have more strength and energy.
7. Exercise reduces pain and improves ability to move around.
8. You can meet new people and see new places.
9. Exercise improves blood sugar and blood pressure.
10. Your heart, muscles and bones get stronger, and your belt size gets smaller.



Introduction

Are There Effects of Physical Activity That May Be Especially Helpful to You?

Were you surprised to find out about so many effects of exercise?

You now have the information you need to complete the first worksheet, “Benefits of Exercise for Me” (page 5). When you are ready, write down some of the benefits of exercise that you feel are most important to you now and in the future. Can any effects of exercise help you today? Next week? Remember that you experience some benefits of exercise immediately but others develop after several weeks of regular activity. How could the exercise you do today help you now? Next week? Next year?

Consider sharing your thoughts about this if there is someone who can encourage you.



Worksheet: Benefits of Exercise for Me

The benefits of exercise most important to me *right now* are:

Some benefits of exercise that might be important to me *in the future* are:

Getting Ready

What Kind of Exercise and How Much Is Necessary?

Many people want to know “What do I have to do?” and “How much exercise is necessary?” We now have a lot of information from scientific research to answer those questions and help you plan your exercise time in the best way for emotional, as well as physical, health.

Health experts say the amount of exercise that most adults need is a total of about 30 minutes of *moderate endurance exercise* most days. Endurance exercise includes walking, jogging, swimming, cycling, and other activities with repeated muscle movement that you can do for extended periods of time. The 30 minutes can be accumulated in several shorter periods of activity spread throughout the day.

How hard do you have to work out? Moderate exercise is hard enough so you feel your breathing increase and you may start to sweat. You can still carry on a conversation, but you don't have enough breath to sing out loud. As you gain experience, activity will get easier to do and you can do more at the same level of effort. Exercise is hard or vigorous if you are breathing hard enough so that you can't talk or sing. We do not recommend hard or vigorous exercise in this program.



Getting Ready

A total of about 150 minutes per week of moderate endurance activity seems to be enough to improve or maintain emotional and mental health, as well as physical health, for most adults. This may not be the right goal for you.

How Much Exercise is Best for Me?

Spending a total of 150 minutes a week walking or doing other moderate exercise may seem impossible. You may feel that you are too busy, or that you could never make yourself do it because you don't like exercise or getting sweaty. Perhaps you have a health condition like pain that limits your activity. In these situations, it's helpful to remember that research studies have found that even a few minutes of exercise at a time can improve health! This means you can exercise for short periods of time several times during the day if that works for you.

At least 10 minutes at a time seems best for experiencing *immediate emotional* benefits from exercise, but every minute counts for overall health. And other research has found that people who exercise only 1 or 2 days a week, for whatever reason, can also get important health benefits.



Getting Ready

Another way to think about it is that every step that you take will move you toward greater wellness. You may have heard that 10,000 steps per day is the goal people need to achieve for healthy exercise. You may be surprised to learn that the 10,000 steps a day idea came from an advertising campaign for step counters. The scientific research suggests that most people, especially those who are older or who have health conditions, don't need that many steps for optimal health. What's important is choosing a goal for steps or amount of time, or distance for walking that works for your personal level of fitness, your physical and emotional health, and demands on your time.

Here's the important message: There is a lot of scientific evidence showing that any activity is better than none. You can choose a plan that works for you.

If you have not been exercising regularly, be smart and safe—give yourself time to ease gradually into more activity. It may take several weeks of regular activity to feel comfortable with a moderate walking speed and effort.

Please read the tip sheets “Before Exercise” (page 9) and “During Exercise” (page 10). These have important information to help you plan and then get the most benefits from your physical activity. There are also tips to help you with motivation to get started.



Tip Sheet: Before Exercise

Making time and getting ready for exercise can be the hardest part. Sometimes you will feel tired or not feel like getting up to start some activity. These tips can help you.

Get Motivated!

1. Think about what matters most to you. Will a few minutes of exercise right now help you live life in a way that you value?
2. It is okay to start small. A few minutes of exercise can start changes like a ripple in a pool of water. This can be as simple as walking around indoors for 5 or 10 minutes or dancing to a couple of songs.
3. Plan ahead and remove barriers that can get in your way. Wear shoes you can walk in or keep walking shoes ready. Have a hat, umbrella, and sunscreen ready if you want to walk outdoors.
4. Remind yourself, “If I don’t exercise, I will miss a chance to improve my mind and body health today.”
5. Make a date to exercise with someone. You may be more likely to keep your promise if someone else is depending on you.
6. If you don’t feel like exercising, decide to do something very small, like walking around for a few minutes.
7. Keep a diary or log of your wellness exercise. Rate your feeling state (-5 is very bad, -3 is bad, 0 is neutral, +3 is good, +5 is very good) before exercise.



Tip Sheet: During Exercise

You can exercise anywhere. You can go for a brisk walk around your neighborhood. You can walk around in a big store or mall; you can play sports with family or friends. You can move while watching TV or at commercial breaks. Use these tips to get the best results.

Make Every Step Count!

1. Warm up your muscles and joints for a few minutes. Then, set a pace that feels good or neutral (not painful or unpleasant).
2. “Start low and go slow” is the best way to safely become more active. Increase time or effort very gradually.
3. Wear comfortable clothes and shoes.
4. Relax your mind. Try not to worry or solve problems. Stay in the moment and focus on the sensations in your body and around you. If your thoughts drift, gently bring them back to the moment.
5. Adjust your exercise so it feels slightly hard but you can still talk and you do not feel stressed.
6. Avoid “all or nothing” thinking. If you cannot exercise for 20-30 minutes, then do shorter sessions. You may feel best physically and emotionally if you do at least 10 minutes of activity. But every minute counts! Sprinkle your day with activity breaks to feel and be healthier.



Start Walking to Wellness

How Do I Set Exercise Goals?

It can be hard to follow through and actually accomplish a wellness goal. If you ever made a New Year's resolution and then didn't keep it, you know that wanting to do something is not always enough to build and sustain the motivation needed to accomplish the goal.

There are some strategies that you can use to be successful in achieving a goal you feel is important. If walking for wellness is important for you right now, you can use these strategies to help you get started and stick with your plan.

First, it helps to be very specific about what it is that you want to do. Can you imagine yourself going for a 10-minute walk with the purpose of taking care of yourself? Where would you like to walk? What time of the day? What will you wear? Will someone be walking with you?

Planning the details of what you want to do will help you understand whether your plan is workable. This can also help you identify problems that could get in the way. For example, if you want to walk outdoors, what will you do if it's raining? Or if you plan to walk with someone, what will be your new plan if that person is not able to go with you?

We recommend that you write down your plans and include those details. We included the "Initial Action Plan" worksheet (page 12) for this purpose. You'll notice that the last entry on that page is a confidence rating. Be honest with yourself when you rate your confidence in achieving your goal. If your rating is less than 5, re-working the plan so that it's a little easier to achieve may help you be more confident and successful.



Initial Action Plan

My action plan (What I want to do this week. Be specific: what, where, how often)

What _____

Where/When _____

How Often _____

Two things that could make it hard to achieve my goal are:

1 _____

2 _____

What I can do to overcome these barriers:

1 _____

2 _____

I believe that I can achieve my goal:

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|

Not sure at all

Somewhat sure

Very sure

Start Walking to Wellness

Go ahead and try walking at a quick pace for at least 10 minutes (or more slowly and for a shorter time if necessary because of your personal situation).

Did you feel some physical changes, such as your breathing and heart rate increasing a little after a few minutes? Were you able to keep going until you got past the warm up phase and could settle into what felt to you like a more comfortable “moderately hard” but not “hard” level of effort? Did you reach a level of effort where you could still talk to someone but you could not sing out loud?

If you can answer “yes” to these questions, then you are probably at the “moderate” level recommended by health experts. This is a level that seems to be “just right” for many people to improve both physical and mental health.

After about 10 minutes of moderate exercise, as you slow down or when you stop to rest, you may notice more changes in physical and emotional sensations. These can include feeling more peaceful and relaxed and perhaps a bit tired if you are not used to this much exercise. And, if the exercise was moderate and not too long or hard, you may be surprised that you also feel a new sense of mental and even physical energy.

Most people experience these changes as pleasant. Some have called these kinds of feelings the exercise “high.” You may not experience these feelings at first and probably won’t experience them every time you exercise even after a lot of experience. Read the



Start Walking to Wellness

tip sheets for some ideas that may help you experience and extend these emotional benefits of exercise.

What Are the Benefits of Keeping a Log?

Keeping a log of your walking or other activity for wellness during the first weeks of a new program or goal can be well worth the effort. Are you willing to make a few notes about your experiences with walking for wellness for at least 3 days during the next week? Writing down your experiences can help you notice small changes and appreciate experiences that would otherwise be lost or forgotten in the noise of everyday life.

If you are willing to try this, turn to the “Personal Log” (page 16). Write in the information about the day of the week and the date, your feelings before exercise, what you did, and your feelings afterward. Use the comment space to make notes about what you experienced. This might include information such as:

- Where you walked
- If you experienced any changes in emotions or physical sensations during or after walking
- Noticing something interesting in your environment
- If you walked with someone and whether you enjoyed the company

Later, when you review your log, you will see what you have accomplished. You may also begin to notice that certain experiences or places, time of day, amount of effort, or length of time being active are better for you.



Weekly Plan

My goal for the next week is (What I want to achieve):

Two things that I learned from my efforts in the last week:

1 _____

2 _____

My action plan for this week (What I want to do this week. Be specific: what, where, how often)

What _____

Where/When _____

How Often _____

I believe that I can achieve this goal:

| | | | | | | | | | |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|

Not sure at all

Somewhat sure

Very sure

Personal Log

Rate your feeling state before and after activities, using this scale: -5 means very bad, -3 is bad, 0 is neutral, +3 is good, and +5 is very good.

| Day/ Date | Feeling Rating Before | Actions Taken (What I did, such as time spent walking, step count, other wellness activities) | Feeling Rating After | Comments (Where I went, who I was with, what I saw, challenges, successes) |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|---|
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Moving and Feeling

How Can I Evaluate My Progress?

As you start moving toward a new goal, look back at what you did, how you felt, and what you have learned. Were you able to meet your activity goal? Are you ready to do more? Was your previous plan too ambitious? Learning what does not work is often important to eventual success in moving forward.

Reviewing your real life experiences can help you set new goals or action plans that fit better with what you are able to do. Achieving a goal that is too easy may not be satisfying, but setting goals that are too hard can leave you feeling discouraged. Most people feel better if they set a series of small goals that allow them to experience success.

Look at your record of feelings before and after exercise. Did you notice a positive change in your feeling state on at least some of the days you walked for wellness? Did any of your experiences surprise you?

For example, people often feel better emotionally after they are physically active, even if they didn't especially enjoy the activity while they were doing it. And the first few minutes of exercise, when your body is "warming up" may feel uncomfortable, but, if you stay in the moderate range of exertion, these feelings are typically replaced by more pleasant or at least neutral sensations as muscles, joints, heart, and lungs adjust and start working smoothly together. One kind of experience that may surprise you is that, if you feel especially bad before exercising, you are likely to experience even greater mood improvements after going for a brisk walk or doing some other moderate physical activity.



Moving and Feeling

Achieving your goal to be active even when you don't feel like walking can give you a sense of satisfaction that you accomplished something important to you. Over time these accomplishments help improve or maintain your self-management skills and emotional health.

Remember that “exercise is medicine.” People don't wait to take a new medicine until they start feeling better, right? They take it right away to help the problem.

Don't wait until you “feel like” walking or doing other physical activity, “Just do it!” You may notice that you feel better almost immediately or it may take a couple of weeks of fairly regular activity before you begin to notice any changes.

How Can I Move Forward?

When you are ready to begin working toward a new goal, we recommend that you review the tip sheets “Before Exercise” (page 9) and “During Exercise” (page 10). Then read the “After Exercise” (page 19) tip sheet for more information that may help you enjoy your exercise time. It can be helpful to complete a “Weekly Plan” (page 20) to support your motivation as you get started on each new goal you may set. What are you ready to try for a week? How often will you walk? For how long? How far? Do you want to try tracking your activity with an activity monitor if you haven't done this before?

Do you believe you can achieve your goal? If your confidence rating is low, consider an easier goal.

When you are ready to begin moving for the new goal, start your new “Personal Log” (page 21) to record your activity and experiences.



Tip Sheet: After Exercise

After a workout, experienced exercisers often feel more energetic and at the same time relaxed. These tips can help you learn to experience the emotional benefits of exercise.

Relax and enjoy the moment!

1. Slow down as you complete your workout. After exercising, slow, easy stretches can feel good and make you more flexible.
2. To feel relaxed and be in a good mood longer, keep your mind in the moment. Celebrate every small success. Do not let your worries spoil the moment.
3. Rate your feelings after exercise (-5 is very bad, -3 is bad, 0 is neutral, +3 is good, +5 is very good). Compare the number to your rating before exercise. Did you notice a change?
4. Keep a diary or log of your activities. Each person's mental and physical response to exercise is different. Write what you learn about exercising for wellness every day. You will get more benefits out of exercise as you learn what works best for you.
5. Exercise can help you sleep better. Stop any moderate or hard exercise at least 3 to 4 hours before bedtime to let your body wind down.



Weekly Plan

My goal for the next week is (What I want to achieve):

Two things that I learned from my previous efforts:

1 _____

2 _____

My action plan for this week (What I want to do this week. Be specific: what, where, how often)

What _____

Where/When _____

How Often _____

I believe that I can achieve this goal:

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|

Not sure at all

Somewhat sure

Very sure

Personal Log

Rate your feeling state before and after activities, using this scale: -5 means very bad, -3 is bad, 0 is neutral, +3 is good, and +5 is very good.

| Day/ Date | Feeling Rating Before | Actions Taken (What I did, such as time spent walking, step count, other wellness activities) | Feeling Rating After | Comments (Where I went, who I was with, what I saw, challenges, successes) |
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Walking and Learning Day by Day

What Have You Learned While Walking to Wellness?

You now have personal experience to help guide your planning. What have you learned about walking or other activities for personal wellness? Have you noticed anything that helps you to exercise in a way that makes it easier, is more enjoyable, or that helps you feel better after you do it? Is moving for wellness more energizing or relaxing than activities that you do to accomplish your duties around the home—like cleaning, cooking, or caregiving—or at work? Is there a time of the day when it is easier to fit walking for health in your schedule, or that's more comfortable for you? Do you prefer walking indoors or outdoors? Have you noticed anything interesting about walking you wanted to tell someone else?

You may have noticed that sometimes your feelings don't change much after exercising. This may be more likely to happen if you are active for less than 10 minutes, your activity does not require much effort (such as a slow walk), or if your mind is distracted by worries and negative thoughts. This may also happen if you feel fairly good before you start, giving you little room for improvement. It is helpful to know that everyone experiences these differences so that you don't mistakenly worry that you are doing something wrong or get discouraged when you are actually making progress.



Walking and Learning Day by Day

How Do I Follow Through?

Everyone who exercises for wellness learns that some exercise activities are more enjoyable than others. Following through on personal commitments to walk or do other wellness activities day after day, even when you don't feel like it, builds emotional strength and confidence that can help you in other parts of your life.

Next Steps

If you are ready to consider a longer-term commitment to *Walking for Wellness*, it can be helpful to once again write down your goals and plans. Are you ready to commit to being active at least a certain amount of time every day? A specific number of days per week? What will work for you? You can choose to make a plan for 1 week, 2 weeks, or longer, depending on your confidence and experiences so far. To help you continue learning, don't forget to start a new "Personal Log" (page 25) as well. You can make additional copies if you want to be able to review your experiences over a longer period of time. You may want to share these with someone who cares about you.



My Plan

My next goal is (What I want to achieve):

Two things that I learned from my past efforts:

1 _____

2 _____

My action plan (What I want to do. Be specific: what, where, how often)

What _____

Where/When _____

How Often _____

I believe that I can achieve this goal:

| | | | | | | | | | |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|

Not sure at all

Somewhat sure

Very sure

Personal Log

Rate your feeling state before and after activities, using this scale: -5 means very bad, -3 is bad, 0 is neutral, +3 is good, and +5 is very good.

| Day/ Date | Feeling Rating Before | Actions Taken (What I did, such as time spent walking, step count, other wellness activities) | Feeling Rating After | Comments (Where I went, who I was with, what I saw, challenges, successes) |
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What's Next

If you have been active fairly regularly for several weeks, you are well on your way! You may feel that what you are doing is working for you and would like to keep it up for a while. Some people like to have a comfortable routine for their activity. Or perhaps you feel you have made good progress but would like to try something new. Some people become bored with doing the same walk or the same activity.

Changing up your routine can help you feel more enthusiastic about walking or doing other exercise for wellness. For example, if you have not used an activity tracker for your wellness walking, you might want to try using some kind of activity monitor and track your activity each day. There are very good products available today that can accurately count your steps, monitor your heart rate, and track other health data. Some come with access to internet programs that let you track your progress online. If you have a computer or smartphone, you can link activity monitors to these devices and get encouraging messages. You can choose to share goals and achievements with friends and family.

Walking in a new place or at a different time of day, walking a little faster, or listening to a different kind of music while you walk may also help you perk up your motivation.

You might wish to learn more about special exercises for your health conditions, such as managing pain or improving your balance to prevent falls. You might be thinking about joining a fitness center or a group of people who walk or do other activities together.

Perhaps you haven't been able to meet all those goals you set when you first decided to try walking for wellness. Life can—and often does—get in the way. Do you need to back track a little or start over because those plans you made didn't work out? Going back to the beginning of this workbook can help you rethink the reasons why you wanted to walk for wellness and get a new start. Almost EVERYONE has starts and stops for exercise, due to health or other life circumstances. Successful people know this is to be expected and they are successful because they start again when it's possible to do so.



Conclusion

If you have completed the *Walking to Wellness* activities in this workbook, you have earned a respectful “Congratulations!” We hope that you have learned some new ways to help you use walking and other movement for mind and body wellness. You can choose to continue or work toward different kinds of wellness goals.

There is no “finish line” for *Walking to Wellness*. Like many other parts of our lives, spending time exercising to become and stay physically and emotionally healthy is a journey and not a destination. Staying on the road day by day is easier if you take the time to learn how to navigate the bumps and to enjoy the good experiences along the way.

There are many ways to improve physical and emotional health, and the activities in this workbook include only a small number of possibilities. We hope you will want to explore and keep moving forward in different ways toward mind and body wellness.



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