

Why walking is good for your mind – Sally Thomas

“There is something the Japanese have known for over 40 years and we are just catching on.

In Japan GP's prescribe 'forest bathing' as a form of preventative medicine. It involves spending time in woods. Sound a little far-fetched? Well, it's been proven that plants and trees release phytoncides which boost our immune system. Forest bathing has also been proven to improve mental as well as physical well-being. It is becoming increasingly accepted that time in nature helps combat stress, anxiety, depression and improves our mental health.

As Hugh Bethell has shown, walking is good for our bodies as well as our minds. The very act of going outside means that we are choosing to be in a different mode for a while – we leave our desk, our phone, our four walls and we move. We enter a dynamic natural environment where we never quite know what the weather will throw at us or what we might encounter on the way. We need to rely on our senses. Even a short walk or simply getting outside has this effect. As we walk we may find we are caught up in our thoughts and hardly notice where we are. There is, however, an opportunity to let go of what's in our head and really notice what's around us – the sounds, the smells, the feeling of the elements, the colours we can see. This is when our mind really starts to reap the benefits; we are creating mental space for ourselves. I find that, when I'm walking, ideas or solutions to problems just pop in my head, seemingly from nowhere, just because I've cleared some space for them to arise.

If you walk with someone you often find conversation flows naturally. There is no need for eye contact. Silences are not awkward, but become an opportunity to notice things around you or to reflect on what's been said. Walking allows us to share things with others that we may not do in other circumstances. Humans need this connection; to be understood and to understand others is vital to our sense of self.

Walking can connect us to memories; the scent of a particular plant or flower can evoke an immediate sense of time, place or people. It also connects us to our primal selves, after all we come from nature and we seek connection to nature.

Our ancestors have been walking for millennia and the act of just putting one foot in front of the other is sometimes what we have to do to get through life.

There is something about walking amidst nature which gives a sense of perspective; we remember that we are part of something much bigger and this can put our worries into perspective as we ponder our insignificance in the great scheme of things, but also marvel at the fact that we are here at all.

Walking..... an opportunity to disconnect from your busy life and reconnect with nature, to listen to others and be heard, to put your worries into perspective and let your mind take some time off for a while. Best of all you can just do it, now or tomorrow, without even making an appointment with your GP.”

Sally Thomas is a keen walker and a Counsellor in private practice offering walking as well as room-based counselling.